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1896

ELECTIC ENGLISH CLASSICS

AN ESSAY

ON

ROBERT BURNS

BY

THOMAS CARLYLE



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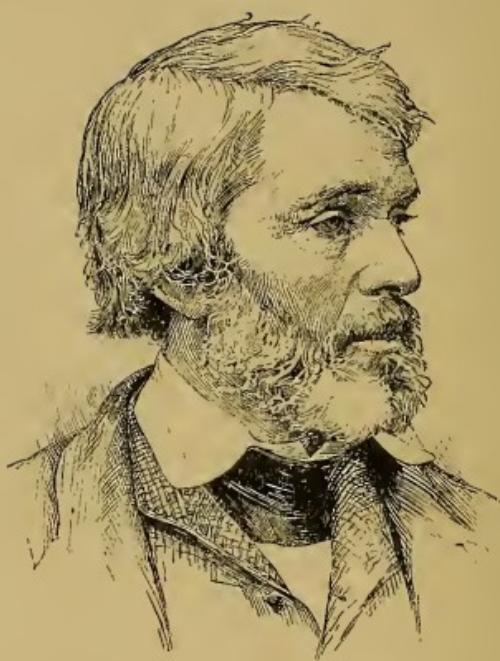
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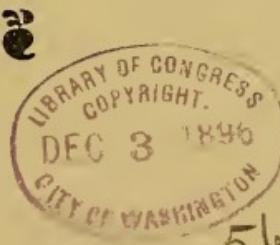
Thomas Carlyle

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CARLYLE'S BURNS.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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THOMAS CARLYLE was born on the 4th of December, 1795, at Ecclefechan, in Annandale, Scotland. His father, a mason (although descended from a family once distinguished on the border), was a man of sterling worth and of undeveloped capacities that Thomas himself did not hesitate to compare with those of Burns. His mother, to whom his attachment was unusually close, was also high-minded and deeply religious, but could not even write until she taught herself when her sons went out into the world.

In 1809, his fifteenth year, his father, "from his small, hard-earned funds," sent Thomas to Edinburgh University to prepare for the ministry. As was the custom, Carlyle made the journey on foot,—one hundred miles in five days,—and set diligently to work in the throng of frugal, ambitious youths characteristic of Scottish universities. Aside from the wide range of reading open to him here, however, he found little instruction that he valued, except that in mathematics. At the end of his college course he became a rural divinity student, being thus free to support himself by teaching.

In 1818, finding the school work altogether repugnant to his shy, proud nature, and having decided to give up the ministry on account of increasing religious doubts, he went to Edinburgh to read law, supporting himself by writing articles for the "Edin-

burgh Encyclopedia," and a life of Schiller for the "London Magazine," and by translating Legendre's "Geometry" and Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister." In addition he received pupils, and in 1822 became tutor to Charles Buller, afterwards a brilliant member of Parliament. In 1825 his "Life of Schiller" was published in book form, and called forth a letter of commendation from Goethe, whom Carlyle profoundly admired.

Meantime, the dyspepsia which clouded all his life had been brought, by comfortless lodgings, to a pitch of almost intolerable intensity. In October, 1826, however, he married the charming and intellectual Jane Welsh, a descendant of John Knox; and her devoted attention to his needs, and even to his many whims, not to speak of the graceful diplomacy by which she guarded his quiet alike against admiring visitors and his neighbors' fowls and pianos, wrought a considerable improvement in his health. Nevertheless he was at no time a really well man.

After about a year in Edinburgh, marked by the publication of "Specimens of German Romance," poverty obliged Carlyle to retire to Craigenputtoch, a small estate belonging to his wife, near Dumfries, in a region which he called "the loneliest, mooriest, and dullest in nature." Here, with occasional excursions into the world, they lived frugally for seven years, both having resolved that Carlyle should not stoop to write without convictions for the sake of money. Being convinced, however, that the modern literature of Germany was not only much richer, but also more intellectual and sincere than that of England, Carlyle continued the series of essays on German authors republished with other essays, in 1838, as "Miscellanies."

But the most characteristic product of his seclusion was "Sartor Resartus" ("the tailor sewed over"), which, professing to review

a German “Philosophy of Clothes,”—i.e., of the institutions and conventions of human life,—records the history of its author, a fictitious Herr Teufelsdröckh. Under this grotesque disguise, and in a style now full of riotous humor and again impressively solemn, Carlyle recorded his own inward experiences and his speculations on things in general. The book frightened the English publishers, and was unsuccessful in “Fraser’s Magazine.” America, however, where the transcendental movement had begun, was ready to welcome it eagerly, and it was first published in book form there in 1836, with an introduction by Emerson, who had sought out Carlyle at Craigenputtoch, and entered into a lasting friendship with him.

Meantime Carlyle had turned his attention more and more to France, and had written essays on Diderot and other eighteenth-century philosophers, and on the famous scandal of the diamond necklace. Finally, he decided to write a history of the French Revolution, and for the sake of wider study moved to London, where he made his home for the rest of his life at No. 5 Cheyne Row, Chelsea. In 1837 appeared “The French Revolution,” a “prose epic” rather than a history, picturing in lurid light and baleful shadow what he regarded as a divine retribution for centuries of cruelty and frivolity. The book brought little immediate profit, the first payment for it being a very welcome sum of fifty pounds from the American edition, sent by Emerson in 1838.

Accordingly, in 1837, Carlyle was obliged to deliver a series of lectures on German literature, which was very successful, and was followed in succeeding years by one on the history of literature, by another on the revolutions of modern Europe, and finally by the famous series afterwards published under the title, “Heroes and Hero Worship.”

In 1837 a pamphlet entitled "Chartism," and in 1843 "Past and Present," testified to Carlyle's anxious interest in current events; and in 1845 appeared "Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches, with Elucidations and a Continuous Narrative," a vindication of the Protector's character, involving immense research, and called by Taine Carlyle's greatest work. In 1850, wrought up by the general political disturbances of 1848, he fiercely attacked the constitution and the utilitarian ideals of English society in "Latter-day Pamphlets." In 1851 dissatisfaction with a memoir of the poet John Sterling called from Carlyle a life of his friend, which has been called "the best biography of its size in the language." In 1858 he completed the largest of his works, the product of thirteen years of research among Prussian documents, "The History of Friedrich II., called Frederick the Great."

Long before this his reputation had become established, and he had not a few enthusiastic adherents and friends in all ranks. Now he was chosen lord rector of Edinburgh University, and delivered there an address, the reception of which was, in Tyn-dall's words, "a perfect triumph." While he was still absent on this errand the sudden death of Mrs. Carlyle left his home desolate. This loss, and a palsy that soon crippled his hand, made the old man's heart fail him.

The fifteen years that remained to him of life were productive of nothing but a volume of "Reminiscences" of his wife, his father, and his friend Edward Irving. These, though left unrevised at his death in 1881, were published by his literary executor, J. A. Froude, the historian, together with a memoir of Carlyle's early life, and the letters of Mrs. Carlyle. These letters, though possessed of great literary charm and much biographical interest, have been generally deemed too intimate for publication. Never-

theless they merely reveal two natures essentially just, faithful, and sincere, and enable us to discern in Carlyle himself, beneath the familiar, rugged figure of the prophet of evil wrapped in a "cloud of whim and dyspepsia," the deep and tender heart of the man of whom Emerson could say, "I never saw more amiableness than is in his countenance."

By inheritance and purpose Carlyle was a "Calvinist without the theology," as nearly akin to his heroes, Knox and Cromwell, as their different epochs would permit. His philosophy of life is their faith under new forms, attained by "the same doubts, despairs, inner conflicts, exaltations." To him, as to them, the universe is one vast and awful "symbol of God;" the end of man's being is "to do without happiness, and instead thereof find blessedness," and man's first duty is to find for what work he is fitted and do it "with his whole might." It is not strange, therefore, that, in the words of Taine, the great French critic, Carlyle passes his life "in expressing and impressing veneration and fear;" and that "all his books are preachings," or that he held it to be his peculiar mission to assail comfortable shams, and proclaim with vehemence the truths which the spectacle of life seemed to force upon his perception.

His main philosophical conceptions were derived from the vast intellectual movement wherein, says Taine, "from 1780 to 1830 Germany produced all the ideas of our historic age;" but they are developed in his own fashion and somewhat narrowed in the process. He would "reduce the heart of man to the English sentiment of duty, and his imagination to the English sentiment of respect." His entire conception of history seems to depend upon a fancied necessity for heroes and hero worship. "Religion and society," he declares, "are based on man's admiration for one

higher than himself." Hence he would regard in history only the growth and influence of impassioned souls. But he esteems a man great only in proportion to the truth that is in him. "It is the property of the hero in every time, in every situation, that he comes back to reality; that he stands upon things, and not shows of things." This devotion to realities in Burns was an important source of Carlyle's admiration for him.

Carlyle himself was possessed with the "sentiment of actuality." He verified dates and texts and traditions, and visited and revisited Frederick's country and Cromwell's, that, by accurately conceiving their surroundings, he might better understand them. "He pierces mountains of paper erudition," says Taine, "and enters into the hearts of men. Everywhere he goes beyond political and conventional history. He divines character, comprehends the spirit of extinguished ages, feels better than any Englishman the great revolutions of the soul. . . . He wishes to draw from history a positive and active law for himself and us. And when he has seized the fact he drags it so energetically before us, . . . he illumines it by such contrasts of extraordinary images, that we are infected and, in spite of ourselves, reach the intensity of his belief and vision."

But Carlyle's faith in hero worship as a cure for all human ills proves him, says Mr. Richard Hutton, "devoid of the one most essential element in the true historical sense,—the appreciation of the inherited conditions and ineradicable habits of ordinary national life." Regarding mankind as a helpless herd without will or wisdom, he loses all sense of justice, and comes to justify the brute force of the slave driver, and to make a hero of the narrow and tyrannical Frederick.

Nevertheless, "though not the safest of guides in politics," in

the judgment of Lowell, "his value as an inspirer and awakener cannot be overestimated. It is a power which belongs only to the highest order of minds, for it is none but a divine fire that can so kindle and irradiate. The debt due him from those who listened to the teachings of his prime, for revealing to them what sublime reserves of power even the humblest may find in manliness, sincerity, and self-reliance, can be paid with nothing short of reverential gratitude."

By his sympathetic penetration into character Carlyle is "the first in insight of English critics," as by the force of his imagination—his power of showing us the past by flashes of lightning—"he is the most vivid and poetic of word painters." "He has," says Lowell, "every quality of a great poet, except that supreme one of rhythm, which shapes both matter and manner to harmonious proportion." His style, as developed in "*Sartor Resartus*" and later works into finished "*Carlylese*," is an apparently whimsical mingling of tempestuous declamation and grotesque humor, with passages of rare and serious beauty. At one moment he satirically explains the utilitarian creed that regulates the "whole duty of pigs" and their human counterparts; at the next he describes, in sweet and solemn cadences, the sunset at the North Cape: "Who would speak or be looked on when behind him lies all Europe and Africa fast asleep, except the watchman, and before him the silent immensity and palace of the Eternal, whereof our sun is but a porch lamp?"

"The secret of Carlyle's style," says Mr. Hutton, "is a great crowding in of contrasted ideas and colors; indeed, such a crowding that for any purpose but his it would be wholly false art. Nothing, however, is so well adapted to teach one that the truest language on the deepest subjects is thrown out, as it were, with

more or less happy effect, at great realities far above our analysis or grasp. . . . Carlyle was by far the greatest interpreter our literature has ever had of the infinite forces working through society, . . . of the dim struggle of man's nature with the passions, doubts, and confusions by which it is surrounded."

Carlyle's "Essay on Burns," written in 1828 for the "Edinburgh Review," is one of the most just and eloquent of his works, and has largely influenced the subsequent estimation of the poet. His opinions of his great countryman derive a peculiar interest from the similarity of the origins of these two men. Both Carlyle and Burns were born in the rugged, somewhat lawless border region of southwestern Scotland; and both were of what Carlyle calls "the fairest descent,—that of the pious, the just, and the wise." Burns's father, like Carlyle's, was an austere religious man of deep, silent affections, "a man of strength and a man of toil." Doubtless, as Carlyle himself conjectures, the elder Burns, had he not fallen into financial difficulties, would, like the elder Carlyle, "have given his son that university training which, however Carlyle might scoff at it, enabled him to face boldly the scholarship of others."

The date of the essay was propitious. Had it been written many years later, Carlyle's insight would have had to cross a greater interval to reach a sympathetic understanding of Burns's worldly failure, than when he had himself just retreated to Craigenputtoch, in serious doubt whether the world would ever grant him a livelihood in return for the ratings which were all he could offer it.

The clear and simple style of Carlyle's early works is a better medium for the elucidation of his subject than the sardonic humor and hurried metaphors that give force to his later exhortations.

Indeed, his titanic, brooding genius, inclining by its very nature to excess of one kind or another, tended as it developed to destroy more and more the balance of his judgment, so that Carlyle completely manifested his power as “the greatest dramatic imagination of his time” only as he ceased to be its “profoundest critic.”

Robert Burns was born at Alloway, in the parish of Ayr, in Dumfriesshire, on the 25th of January, 1759. His father, William Burns, a nursery gardener, superior to his neighbors both in mental power and in family traditions, made every effort to give his sons the best education attainable, and taught them at home when no better instruction offered. Robert’s most valuable teacher was a Mr. Murdoch, of more than ordinary ability, who made him an “excellent English scholar,” helped him to get a smattering of French, and made important additions to his scanty stock of books, among them the works of Pope. Burns’s mother,—from whom he is said to have inherited “his lyrical gift, his wit, his mirth,”—with an old woman in the family, stored his memory with the legends and ballads of the countryside.

In Robert’s sixteenth year his father fell into financial difficulties, and the anxieties and poor living of this time probably undermined his health and strengthened his inherited tendency to melancholy. Soon after, the family moved to the farm of Lochlea, at Tarbolton, where the sons were paid seven pounds a year for their labor.

At seventeen Burns, much to his father’s displeasure, had attended a dancing school “to give his manners a brush,” and thenceforth, says his brother Gilbert, he was “constantly the victim of some fair enslaver.” He had already begun to address verses to his various loves; had read Sterne, Ramsay, and Ossian,

and followed his plow with a book of English songs always at hand.

In Burns's twenty-third year he went to Irvine to work at flax dressing, a venture which had serious consequences. His partner was dishonest; his shop was burned; worse than all, he fell in with dissipated acquaintances who broke down forever those habits of sober uprightness which had hitherto ruled his conduct. Here, however, he fell in with the poems of Fergusson, which, more than any others, seem to have encouraged him to try his own powers.

In 1784 William Burnes died, and his children took the farm of Mossgiel, at Manchline. In 1785 came the first outbreak of Burns's genius, producing "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "To a Mouse," the "Address to the Deil," and many other poems, including several satires upon the strict Calvinistic doctrines of the "Auld Licht," or conservative, section of the Scottish church.

The next year, also rich in poetical production, brought the poet himself into misfortunes, monetary and personal. He had lost his character for upright conduct through his informal marriage contract with Jean Armour, and her family had "uncoupled the merciless pack of the law at his heels." In his anger and distress, Burns engaged to go to Jamaica as a bookkeeper, and published six hundred copies of his poems in the hope of making nine pounds for his passage money. Meantime, as Jean Armour refused to fulfill the contract, he was free to betroth himself to Mary Campbell. After the parting vows described in "Highland Mary," she went to her home to prepare for the marriage, and there died. Her lover, having gained twenty pounds by the Kilmarnock edition, was about to sail alone, when enthusiastic predictions of success for a second edition prompted him to take his poems to Edinburgh.

Arriving in the capital in November, 1786, he became the lion of fashionable and learned society, and spent the winter in superintending the new issue of three thousand copies. During the summer he made a tour in the Highlands and, as a great man now, visited his old home.

Through much of his second winter in Edinburgh he was confined to his room by an accident, and found his chief interest in a literary and passionate correspondence with a Mrs. M'Lehose, to whom he gave the name of "Clarinda." In the spring, having applied for a position in the excise service, as a resource in case of bad fortune, he rented the farm of Ellisland, received his profits from the new edition,—some five hundred pounds, of which he gave about a third to his family,—and was married, after all, to Jean Armour.

Early in the next year, as his farm was proving "a ruinous affair," he entered on active service in the excise. Despite this exacting work, he wrote in this year "Tam o' Shanter," and composed songs to old Scotch tunes for Johnson's "Musical Museum." At the end of 1791 he moved to Dumfries, where he was at first well received by the higher class of residents. Town life, however, not only deprived him of much of his natural inspiration, but increased the drain upon his diminished resources; so that, for the first time in the life that had seemed so careless and jovial, he fell into debt. His rashly expressed democratic opinions, too, as well as the convivial excesses into which he was drawn by his popularity and feeling of good-fellowship, brought him an unenviable reputation.

By 1795 the cloud of suspicion had somewhat passed over; he was reconciled to Mrs. Riddell, the friend whose alienation had most affected him, joined the Dumfriesshire Corps of Vol-

unteers, and wrote a song, “Does haughty Gaul invasion threat ?” which showed that he had done with French sympathies.

But his health was failing fast. Obliged to give up his duties, he begged to have his whole salary continued, lest he should “perish of hunger.” While the answer was still doubtful, he was threatened with imprisonment for debt, and wrote for money, in an agony of apprehension, to his brother, and to the publisher, Mr. Thomson, to whom he had freely given so many priceless poems. Hard upon this sad wreck of the independence he had struggled for followed the premature close of Burns’s life. He died on the 21st of July, 1796, and was buried from the town hall of Dumfries with military honors.

## BURNS.

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IN the modern arrangements of society it is no uncommon thing that a man of genius must, like Butler,<sup>1</sup> "ask for bread, and receive a stone;"<sup>2</sup> for, in spite of our grand maxim of supply and demand, it is by no means the highest excellence that men are most forward to recognize. The inventor of a spinning jenny<sup>3</sup> is pretty sure of his reward in his own day; but the writer of a true poem, like the apostle of a true religion, is nearly as sure of the contrary. We do not know whether it is not an aggravation of the injustice that there is generally a posthumous retribution. Robert Burns, in the course of nature, might yet have been living; but his short life was spent in toil and penury, and he died in the prime of his manhood,<sup>4</sup> miserable and neglected. And yet already a brave mausoleum<sup>5</sup> shines over his dust, and more than one splendid monument has been reared in other places to his fame; the street where he languished in poverty is called by his name; the highest personages in our literature have been proud

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Butler (1612–80). His satirical poem, *Hudibras*, made him for a time very popular at court, but he died in poverty and obscurity.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Matt. vii. 9.

<sup>3</sup> The spinning jenny is a machine for spinning several threads at a time, invented, in 1764, by James Hargreaves, a weaver. His patent was set aside, however, and he died a poor man, in spite of Carlyle's assertion.

<sup>4</sup> At the age of thirty-seven.

<sup>5</sup> A tin-roofed, cumbrous mausoleum in St. Michael's Churchyard, Dumfries. There is another monument at Ayr, and another in the form of a Greek temple on the Calton Hill, Edinburgh.

to appear as his commentators and admirers ; and here is the sixth narrative of his life that has been given to the world !

Mr. Lockhart<sup>1</sup> thinks it necessary to apologize for this new attempt on such a subject ; but his readers, we believe, will readily acquit him ; or, at worst, will censure only the performance of his task, not the choice of it. The character of Burns, indeed, is a theme that cannot easily become either trite or exhausted, and will probably gain rather than lose in its dimensions by the distance to which it is removed by time. No man, it has been said, is a hero to his valet, and this is probably true ; but the fault is at least as likely to be the valet's as the hero's ; for it is certain that to the vulgar eye few things are wonderful that are not distant. It is difficult for men to believe that the man, the mere man whom they see—nay, perhaps painfully feel—toiling at their side through the poor jostlings of existence, can be made of finer clay than themselves. Suppose that some dining acquaintance of Sir Thomas Lucy's,<sup>2</sup> and neighbor of John-a-Combe's,<sup>3</sup> had snatched an hour or two from the preservation of his game, and written us a Life of Shakespeare ! What dissertations should we not have had, not on "Hamlet" and "The Tempest," but on the wool trade,<sup>4</sup> and deer stealing, and the libel and vagrant laws ; and how the poacher became a player ; and how Sir Thomas and Mr. John had Christian compassion, and did not push him to extremities !

In like manner, we believe, with respect to Burns, that till the companions of his pilgrimage,—the honorable excise commission-

<sup>1</sup> John Gibson Lockhart (1794–1854), son-in-law of Scott, and author of a *Life of Scott*, and of the *Life of Robert Burns* reviewed in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> The master of Charlecote Hall, near Stratford-upon-Avon, whose deer the youthful Shakespeare is said by popular tradition to have stolen. Being arraigned before Sir Thomas, he wrote some doggerel in revenge, which so kindled the knight's wrath that Shakespeare had to leave Stratford for London.

<sup>3</sup> A well-to-do burgher of Stratford, on whom Shakespeare is said to have written satirical rhymes.

<sup>4</sup> John Shakespeare, father of the poet, is said to have dealt in wool.

ers, and the gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt,<sup>1</sup> and the Dumfries aristocracy, and all the squires and earls, equally with the Ayr writers<sup>2</sup> and the New and Old Light Clergy,<sup>3</sup> whom he had to do with,—shall have become invisible in the darkness of the past, or visible only by light borrowed from his juxtaposition, it will be difficult to measure him by any true standard, or to estimate what he really was and did, in the eighteenth century, for his country and the world. It will be difficult, we say, but still a fair problem for literary historians; and repeated attempts will give us repeated approximations.

His former biographers have done something, no doubt, but by no means a great deal, to assist us. Dr. Currie<sup>4</sup> and Mr. Walker,<sup>5</sup> the principal of these writers, have both, we think, mistaken one essentially important thing: their own and the world's true relation to their author, and the style in which it became such men to think and to speak of such a man. Dr. Currie loved the poet truly; more, perhaps, than he avowed to his readers, or even to himself; yet he everywhere introduces him with a certain patronizing, apologetic air, as if the polite public might think it strange and half unwarrantable that he, a man of science, a scholar and gentleman, should do such honor to a rustic. In all this, however, we readily admit that his fault was not want of love, but weakness of faith, and regret that the first and kindest of all our poet's

<sup>1</sup> A society comprising the heads of the Scottish aristocracy, to whom Burns dedicated the Edinburgh edition of his poems, and who took one hundred copies.

<sup>2</sup> "Writer" is the Scottish term for a lawyer. It was a writer at Ayr who declared that the tearing of the contract with Jean Armour was equal to a divorce.

<sup>3</sup> "New and Old Light clergy," i.e., the liberal and the strictly Calvinistic divisions of the Scottish Church.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. James Currie, who, in 1800, prepared the first edition of Burns's poems that was published after his death, and realized £1400 for the widow and children.

<sup>5</sup> Josiah Walker, author of the Memoir attached to the 1811 edition of Burns's poems.

biographers should not have seen farther or believed more boldly what he saw. Mr. Walker offends more deeply in the same kind ; and both err alike in presenting us with a detached catalogue of his several supposed attributes, virtues and vices, instead of a delineation of the resulting character as a living unity. This, however, is not painting a portrait, but gauging the length and breadth of the several features, and jotting down their dimensions in arithmetical ciphers. Nay, it is not so much as that ; for we are yet to learn by what arts or instruments the mind could be so measured and gauged.

Mr. Lockhart, we are happy to say, has avoided both these errors. He uniformly treats Burns as the high and remarkable man the public voice has now pronounced him to be ; and in delineating him he has avoided the method of separate generalities, and rather sought for characteristic incidents, habits, actions, sayings ; in a word, for aspects which exhibit the whole man as he looked and lived among his fellows. The book, accordingly, with all its deficiencies, gives more insight, we think, into the true character of Burns than any prior biography ; though, being written on the very popular and condensed scheme of an article for "Constable's Miscellany,"<sup>1</sup> it has less depth than we could have wished and expected from a writer of such power, and contains rather more, and more multifarious, quotations than belong of right to an original production. Indeed, Mr. Lockhart's own writing is generally so good, so clear, direct, and nervous, that we seldom wish to see it making place for another man's. However, the spirit of the work is throughout candid, tolerant, and anxiously conciliating ; compliments and praises are liberally distributed on all hands to great and small ; and, as Mr. Morris Birkbeck<sup>2</sup> observes of the society in the backwoods of America, "the courtesies of polite life are never lost sight of for a moment." But there are better things than these in the volume, and we can safely testify

<sup>1</sup> A series of cheap standard works, the publication of which was begun in 1825 by the well-known Edinburgh publisher, Constable.

<sup>2</sup> Author of a work on America, published in 1818.

not only that it is easily and pleasantly read a first time, but may even be without difficulty read again.

Nevertheless we are far from thinking that the problem of Burns's biography has yet been adequately solved. We do not allude so much to deficiency of facts or documents—though of these we are still every day receiving some fresh accession—as to the limited and imperfect application of them to the great end of biography. Our notions upon this subject may perhaps appear extravagant; but if an individual is really of consequence enough to have his life and character recorded for public remembrance, we have always been of opinion that the public ought to be made acquainted with all the inward springs and relations of his character. How did the world and man's life from his particular position represent themselves to his mind? How did coexisting circumstances modify him from without? how did he modify these from within? with what endeavors and what efficacy rule over them? with what resistance and what suffering sink under them? In one word, what and how produced was the effect of society on him? what and how produced was his effect on society? He who should answer these questions in regard to any individual would, as we believe, furnish a model of perfection in biography. Few individuals, indeed, can deserve such a study; and many lives will be written—and for the gratification of innocent curiosity ought to be written—and read and forgotten which are not in this sense biographies. But Burns, if we mistake not, is one of these few individuals; and such a study, at least with such a result, he has not yet obtained. Our own contributions to it, we are aware, can be but scanty and feeble; but we offer them with good will, and trust they may meet with acceptance from those they are intended for.

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BURNS first came upon the world as a prodigy, and was in that character entertained by it, in the usual fashion, with loud, vague, tumultuous wonder, speedily subsiding into censure

and neglect, till his early and most mournful death again awakened an enthusiasm for him which, especially as there was now nothing to be done and much to be spoken, has prolonged itself even to our own time. It is true the "nine days"<sup>1</sup> have long since elapsed, and the very continuance of this clamor proves that Burns was no vulgar wonder. Accordingly, even in sober judgments, where, as years passed by, he has come to rest more and more exclusively on his own intrinsic merits, and may now be well-nigh shorn of that casual radiance, he appears not only as a true British poet, but as one of the most considerable British men of the eighteenth century. Let it not be objected that he did little. He did much if we consider where and how. If the work performed was small we must remember that he had his very materials to discover; for the metal he worked in lay hid under the desert moor, where no eye but his had guessed its existence; and we may almost say that with his own hand he had to construct the tools for fashioning it. For he found himself in deepest obscurity, without help, without instruction, without model—or with models only of the meanest sort. An educated man stands, as it were, in the midst of a boundless arsenal and magazine, filled with all the weapons and engines which man's skill has been able to devise from the earliest time; and he works, accordingly, with a strength borrowed from all past ages. How different is his state who stands on the outside of that storehouse, and feels that its gates must be stormed, or remain forever shut against him! His means are the commonest and rudest; the mere work done is no measure of his strength. A dwarf behind his steam engine may remove mountains; but no dwarf will hew them down with a pickax, and he must be a Titan<sup>2</sup> that hurls them abroad with his arms.

It is in this last shape that Burns presents himself. Born in an age the most prosaic Britain had yet seen, and in a condition the

<sup>1</sup> "Nine days' wonder" is the popular expression for a short-lived fame.

<sup>2</sup> In Greek mythology the Titans were the twelve giants born of Earth (Gaia) and Heaven (Uranus). Being hurled from the heavens by Zeus, they vainly tried to scale them by heaping one mountain upon another.

most disadvantageous, where his mind, if it accomplished aught, must accomplish it under the pressure of continual bodily toil, nay, of penury and desponding apprehension of the worst evils, and with no furtherance but such knowledge as dwells in a poor man's hut, and the rhymes of a Fergusson<sup>1</sup> or Ramsay<sup>2</sup> for his standard of beauty, he sinks not under all these impediments. Through the fogs and darkness of that obscure region his lynx eye discerns the true relations of the world and human life; he grows into intellectual strength and trains himself into intellectual expertness. Impelled by the expansive movement of his own irrepressible soul, he struggles forward into the general view, and with haughty modesty lays down before us, as the fruit of his labor, a gift which Time has now pronounced imperishable. Add to all this that his darksome, drudging childhood and youth was by far the kindest era of his whole life, and that he died in his thirty-seventh year, and then ask if it be strange that his poems are imperfect and of small extent, or that his genius attained no mastery in its art! Alas! his sun shone as through a tropical tornado, and the pale shadow of death eclipsed it at noon! Shrouded in such baleful vapors, the genius of Burns was never seen in clear, azure splendor, enlightening the world. But some beams from it did by fits pierce through, and it tinted those clouds with rainbow and orient colors into a glory and stern grandeur which men silently gazed on with wonder and tears!

We are anxious not to exaggerate, for it is exposition rather than admiration that our readers require of us here; and yet to avoid some tendency to that side is no easy matter. We love Burns and we pity him, and love and pity are prone to magnify. Criticism, it is sometimes thought, should be a cold business. We

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fergusson (1751–74), a young Scottish poet of Edinburgh life, whose poems, though valuable for their truth and lively humor, hardly deserve the warm admiration accorded them by Burns.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Ramsay (1686–1758), a poet of Scottish life, and the preserver of many old popular Scottish songs. His most famous poem, *The Gentle Shepherd*, is a coarse, but spirited and faithful, picture of peasant life.

are not so sure of this ; but, at all events, our concern with Burns is not exclusively that of critics. True and genial as his poetry must appear, it is not chiefly as a poet, but as a man, that he interests and affects us. He was often advised to write a tragedy. Time and means were not lent him for this ; but through life he enacted a tragedy, and one of the deepest. We question whether the world has since witnessed so utterly sad a scene ; whether Napoleon himself, left to brawl with Sir Hudson Lowe,<sup>1</sup> and perish on his rock "amid the melancholy main," presented to the reflecting mind such a "spectacle of pity and fear"<sup>2</sup> as did this intrinsically nobler, gentler, and perhaps greater soul, wasting itself away in a hopeless struggle with base entanglements which coiled closer and closer round him, till only death opened him an outlet. Conquerors are a class of men with whom, for most part, the world could well dispense ; nor can the hard intellect, the unsympathizing loftiness, and high but selfish enthusiasm of such persons inspire us in general with any affection. At best it may excite amazement, and their fall, like that of a pyramid, will be beheld with a certain sadness and awe. But a true poet, a man in whose heart resides some effluence of wisdom, some tone of the "eternal melodies," is the most precious gift that can be bestowed on a generation. We see in him a freer, purer development of whatever is noblest in ourselves ; his life is a rich lesson to us ; and we mourn his death as that of a benefactor who loved and taught us.

Such a gift had Nature, in her bounty, bestowed on us in Robert Burns ; but, with queenlike indifference, she cast it from her hand like a thing of no moment, and it was defaced and torn asunder, as an idle bauble, before we recognized it. To the ill-starred Burns was given the power of making man's life more

<sup>1</sup> The British governor of the island of St. Helena, Napoleon's final place of exile, where annoying and petty regulations greatly exasperated the fallen emperor.

<sup>2</sup> The essential mission of tragedy, according to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, was to purify the soul "by exciting pity and fear."

venerable, but that of wisely guiding his own life was not given. Destiny,—for so in our ignorance we must speak,—his faults, the faults of others, proved too hard for him; and that spirit which might have soared, could it but have walked, soon sank to the dust, its glorious faculties trodden under foot in the blossom, and died, we may almost say, without ever having lived. And so kind and warm a soul! so full of inborn riches, of love to all living and lifeless things! How his heart flows out in sympathy over universal Nature, and in her bleakest provinces discerns a beauty and a meaning! The “Daisy”<sup>1</sup> falls not unheeded under his plowshare; nor the ruined nest of that “wee, cowering, timorous beastie,”<sup>2</sup> cast forth, after all its provident pains, to “thole the sleety dribble and cranreuch cauld.”<sup>3</sup> The “hoar visage” of winter delights him; he dwells with a sad and oft-returning fondness in these scenes of solemn desolation. But the voice of the tempest becomes an anthem to his ears; he loves to walk in the sounding woods, for it raises his thoughts “to Him that walketh on the wings of the wind.”<sup>4</sup> A true poet soul; for it needs but to be struck, and the sound it yields will be music! But observe him chiefly as he mingles with his brother men. What warm, all-comprehending fellow-feeling! what trustful, boundless love! what generous exaggeration of the object loved! His rustic friend, his nut-brown maiden, are no longer mean and homely, but a hero and a queen, whom he prizes as the paragons of earth. The rough scenes of Scottish life, not seen by him in any Arcadian<sup>5</sup> illusion, but in the rude contradiction, in the smoke and soil of a too harsh reality, are still lovely to him. Poverty is in-

<sup>1</sup> See the poem, *To a Mountain Daisy*.

<sup>2</sup> See the poem, *To a Mouse on Turning her up in her Nest with the Plow*, November, 1785.

<sup>3</sup> “Thole the sleety,” etc., i.e., suffer the sleety drizzle and hoarfrost cold.

<sup>4</sup> See Burns’s *Commonplace Book* for April, 1783 or 1784; also, Ps. civ. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Arcadia, an inland pastoral state of ancient Greece, has in later literature been made the typical scene of the sentimental adventures of countless artificial and courtly shepherds and shepherdesses.

deed his companion, but Love also, and Courage. The simple feelings, the worth, the nobleness, that dwell under the straw roof, are dear and venerable to his heart, and thus over the lowest provinces of man's existence he pours the glory of his own soul ; and they rise, in shadow and sunshine, softened and brightened into a beauty which other eyes discern not in the highest. He has a just self-consciousness which too often degenerates into pride ; yet it is a noble pride, for defense, not for offense ; no cold, suspicious feeling, but a frank and social one. The peasant poet bears himself, we might say, like a king in exile : he is cast among the low, and feels himself equal to the highest ; yet he claims no rank, that none may be disputed to him. The forward he can repel, the supercilious he can subdue ; pretensions of wealth or ancestry are of no avail with him ; there is a fire in that dark eye under which the "insolence of condescension" cannot thrive. In his abasement, in his extreme need, he forgets not for a moment the majesty of poetry and manhood. And yet, far as he feels himself above common men, he wanders not apart from them, but mixes warmly in their interests—nay, throws himself into their arms, and, as it were, entreats them to love him. It is moving to see how in his darkest despondency this proud being still seeks relief from friendship ; unbosoms himself, often to the unworthy ; and, amid tears, strains to his glowing heart a heart that knows only the name of friendship. And yet he was "quick to learn," a man of keen vision, before whom common disguises afforded no concealment. His understanding saw through the hollowness even of accomplished deceivers, but there was a generous credulity in his heart. And so did our peasant show himself among us "a soul like an æolian harp,<sup>1</sup> in whose strings the vulgar wind, as it passed through them, changed itself into articulate melody." And this was he for whom the world found no fitter business than quarreling with smugglers and vintners, computing excise dues

<sup>1</sup> An æolian harp is a stringed instrument from which musical tones are produced by a current of wind. It was named from Æolus, the Greek god of the winds.

upon tallow, and gauging ale barrels!<sup>1</sup> In such toils was that mighty spirit sorrowfully wasted ; and a hundred years may pass on before another such is given us to waste.

All that remains of Burns,—the writings he has left,—seems to us, as we hinted above, no more than a poor, mutilated fraction of what was in him ; brief, broken glimpses of a genius that could never show itself complete, that wanted all things for completeness,—culture, leisure, true effort, nay, even length of life. His poems are, with scarcely any exception, mere occasional effusions, poured forth with little premeditation, expressing by such means as offered the passion, opinion, or humor of the hour. Never in one instance was it permitted him to grapple with any subject with the full collection of his strength, to fuse and mold it in the concentrated fire of his genius. To try by the strict rules of art such imperfect fragments would be at once unprofitable and unfair. Nevertheless there is something in these poems, marred and defective as they are, which forbids the most fastidious student of poetry to pass them by. Some sort of enduring quality they must have ; for, after fifty years of the wildest vicissitudes in poetic taste, they still continue to be read, nay, are read more and more eagerly, more and more extensively ; and this not only by literary virtuosos and that class upon whom transitory causes operate most strongly, but by all classes, down to the most hard, unlettered, and truly natural class, who read little, and especially no poetry, except because they find pleasure in it. The grounds of so singular and wide a popularity, which extends, in a literal sense, from the palace to the hut and over all regions where the English tongue is spoken, are well worth inquiring into. After every just deduction, it seems to imply some rare excellence in these works. What is that excellence?

To answer this question will not lead us far. The excellence

<sup>1</sup> As an exciseman, Burns's business was to levy the excise,—an English tax upon articles for home consumption,—and as far as possible to prevent smuggling.

of Burns is, indeed, among the rarest, whether in poetry or prose ; but, at the same time, it is plain and easily recognized,—his sincerity, his indisputable air of truth. Here are no fabulous woes or joys ; no hollow, fantastic sentimentalities ; no wiredrawn refinings, either in thought or feeling. The passion that is traced before us has glowed in a living heart ; the opinion he utters has risen in his own understanding and been a light to his own steps. He does not write from hearsay, but from sight and experience ; it is the scenes that he has lived and labored amidst that he describes. Those scenes, rude and humble as they are, have kindled beautiful emotions in his soul, noble thoughts and definite resolves ; and he speaks forth what is in him not from any outward call of vanity or interest, but because his heart is too full to be silent. He speaks it with such melody and modulation as he can, “in homely, rustic jingle ;” but it is his own, and genuine. This is the grand secret for finding readers and retaining them : let him who would move and convince others be first moved and convinced himself. Horace’s rule, “*Si vis me flere,*”<sup>1</sup> is applicable in a wider sense than the literal one. To every poet, to every writer, we might say, “Be true if you would be believed.” Let a man but speak forth with genuine earnestness the thought, the emotion, the actual condition of his own heart, and other men—so strangely are we all knit together by the tie of sympathy—must and will give heed to him. In culture, in extent of view, we may stand above the speaker or below him ; but in either case his words, if they are earnest and sincere, will find some response within us ; for, in spite of all casual varieties in outward rank or inward, as face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man.

This may appear a very simple principle, and one which Burns had little merit in discovering. True, the discovery is easy enough ; but the practical appliance is not easy,—is, indeed, the fundamental difficulty which all poets have to strive with, and which scarcely one in a hundred ever fairly surmounts. A head

<sup>1</sup> “*Si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi*” (“ If you wish me to weep, your own heart must first be wrung ”).—*Ars Poetica*, line 102.

too dull to discriminate the true from the false, a heart too dull to love the one at all risks and to hate the other in spite of all temptations, are alike fatal to a writer. With either, or, as more commonly happens, with both, of these deficiencies, combine a love of distinction, a wish to be original, which is seldom wanting, and we have Affectation, the bane of literature, as Cant, its elder brother, is of morals. How often does the one and the other front us, in poetry as in life! Great poets themselves are not always free of this vice; nay, it is precisely on a certain sort and degree of greatness that it is most commonly ingrafted. A strong effort after excellence will sometimes solace itself with a mere shadow of success; he who has much to unfold will sometimes unfold it imperfectly. Byron,<sup>1</sup> for instance, was no common man; yet, if we examine his poetry with this view, we shall find it far enough from faultless. Generally speaking, we should say that it is not true. He refreshes us not with the divine fountain, but too often with vulgar, strong waters, stimulating, indeed, to the taste, but soon ending in dislike, or even nausea. Are his Harolds and Giaours,<sup>2</sup> we would ask, real men,—we mean poetically consistent and conceivable men? Do not these characters—does not the character of their author, which more or less shines through them all—rather appear a thing put on for the occasion; no natural or possible mode of being, but something intended to look much grander than nature? Surely all these stormful agonies, this volcanic heroism, superhuman contempt, and moody desperation, with so much scowling and teeth-gnashing and other sulphurous humor, is more like the brawling of a player in some paltry tragedy which is to last three hours, than the bearing of a man in the business of life, which is to last threescore and

<sup>1</sup> George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1821), one of the greatest English poets of the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The Giaour and Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, like all the other narrative poems of Byron, show us, in varying costumes, the melancholy, affected, but “splendid and puissant” personality of the poet himself, involved in improbable, but daring and vividly pictured, adventures.

ten years. To our minds there is a taint of this sort, something which we should call theatrical, false, affected, in every one of these otherwise so powerful pieces. Perhaps "Don Juan,"<sup>1</sup> especially the latter parts of it, is the only thing approaching to a sincere work he ever wrote; the only work where he showed himself in any measure as he was, and seemed so intent on his subject as, for moments, to forget himself. Yet Byron hated this vice,—we believe, heartily detested it; nay, he had declared formal war against it in words. So difficult is it even for the strongest to make this primary attainment, which might seem the simplest of all,—to read its own consciousness without mistakes, without errors involuntary or willful! We recollect no poet of Burns's susceptibility who comes before us from the first, and abides with us to the last, with such a total want of affectation. He is an honest man and an honest writer. In his successes and his failures, in his greatness and his littleness, he is ever clear, simple, true, and glitters with no luster but his own. We reckon this to be a great virtue; to be, in fact, the root of most other virtues, literary as well as moral.

Here, however, let us say, it is to the poetry of Burns that we now allude; to those writings which he had time to meditate, and where no special reason existed to warp his critical feeling or obstruct his endeavor to fulfill it. Certain of his letters and other fractions of prose composition by no means deserve this praise. Here, doubtless, there is not the same natural truth of style, but, on the contrary, something not only stiff, but strained and twisted; a certain high-flown, inflated tone, the stilting emphasis of which contrasts ill with the firmness and rugged simplicity of even his poorest verses. Thus no man, it would appear, is altogether unaffected. Does not Shakespeare himself sometimes premeditate the sheerest bombast! But, even with regard to these letters of Burns, it is but fair to state that he had two

<sup>1</sup> Byron's last long poem, left unfinished at his death. The scene of the latter part is laid in English society, and the cynicism of the early poems has in this become matured and less affected, but intensified.

excuses. The first was his comparative deficiency in language. Burns, though for most part he writes with singular force and even gracefulness, is not master of English prose as he is of Scottish verse; not master of it, we mean, in proportion to the depth and vehemence of his matter. These letters strike us as the effort of a man to express something which he has no organ fit for expressing. But a second and weightier excuse is to be found in the peculiarity of Burns's social rank. His correspondents are often men whose relation to him he has never accurately ascertained; whom, therefore, he is either forearming himself against or else unconsciously flattering by adopting the style he thinks will please them. At all events, we should remember that these faults, even in his letters, are not the rule, but the exception. Whenever he writes—as one would ever wish to do—to trusted friends and on real interests, his style becomes simple, vigorous, expressive, sometimes even beautiful. His letters to Mrs. Dunlop<sup>1</sup> are uniformly excellent.

But we return to his poetry. In addition to its sincerity, it has another peculiar merit which, indeed, is but a mode, or perhaps a means, of the foregoing. This displays itself in his choice of subjects, or rather in his indifference as to subjects, and the power he has of making all subjects interesting. The ordinary poet, like the ordinary man, is forever seeking in external circumstances the help which can be found only in himself. In what is familiar and near at hand he discerns no form or comeliness; home is not poetical, but prosaic; it is in some past, distant, conventional, heroic world that poetry resides; were he there and not here, were he thus and not so, it would be well with him. Hence our innumerable host of rose-colored novels and iron-mailed epics, with their locality not on the earth, but somewhere nearer to the moon; hence our virgins of the sun and our knights of the cross, malicious Saracens in turbans and copper-

<sup>1</sup> A descendant of William Wallace, who, meeting, in 1786, with The Cotter's Saturday Night, at once sent to Burns for half a dozen copies of his poems, and opened with him a lifelong correspondence.

colored chiefs in wampum,<sup>1</sup> and so many other truculent figures from the heroic times or the heroic climates, who on all hands swarm in our poetry. Peace be with them! But yet, as a great moralist proposed preaching to the men of this century, so would we fain preach to the poets, "a sermon on the duty of staying at home." Let them be sure that heroic ages and heroic climates can do little for them. That form of life has attraction for us less because it is better or nobler than our own than simply because it is different; and even this attraction must be of the most transient sort. For will not our own age one day be an ancient one, and have as quaint a costume as the rest; not contrasted with the rest, therefore, but ranked along with them in respect of quaintness? Does Homer<sup>2</sup> interest us now because he wrote of what passed beyond his native Greece and two centuries before he was born, or because he wrote what passed in God's world and in the heart of man which is the same after thirty centuries? Let our poets look to this: is their feeling really finer, truer, and their vision deeper, than that of other men, they have nothing to fear, even from the humblest subject; is it not so, they have nothing to hope but an ephemeral favor, even from the highest.

The poet, we imagine, can never have far to seek for a subject; the elements of his art are in him and around him on every hand. For him the ideal world is not remote from the actual, but under it and within it; nay, he is a poet precisely because he can discern it there. Wherever there is a sky above him and a world around him, the poet is in his place; for here, too, is man's existence, with its infinite longings and small acquirings, its ever-thwarted, ever-renewed endeavors, its unspeakable aspirations,

<sup>1</sup> See the works of Byron, Moore, Scott, Southey, and other romancers of the time. The knights of the cross and the Saracens were the main characters of Scott's *Talisman*, published in 1825, and the Indian chief is a favorite hero of the American, James Fenimore Cooper, and figures also in Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming*.

<sup>2</sup> Carlyle read Homer for the first time, and with great interest, at Craigenputtoch.

its fears and hopes that wander through eternity, and all the mystery of brightness and of gloom that it was ever made of, in any age or climate, since man first began to live. Is there not the fifth act of a tragedy in every deathbed, though it were a peasant's and a bed of heath? And are wooings and weddings obsolete, that there can be comedy no longer? Or are men suddenly grown wise, that Laughter must no longer shake his sides, but be cheated of his farce? Man's life and nature is as it was and as it will ever be. But the poet must have an eye to read these things, and a heart to understand them, or they come and pass away before him in vain. He is a *vates*,<sup>1</sup> a seer; a gift of vision has been given him. Has life no meanings for him which another cannot equally decipher? Then he is no poet, and Delphi<sup>2</sup> itself will not make him one.

In this respect Burns, though not, perhaps, absolutely a great poet, better manifests his capability, better proves the truth of his genius, than if he had by his own strength kept the whole Minerva Press<sup>3</sup> going to the end of his literary course. He shows himself at least a poet of Nature's own making; and Nature, after all, is still the grand agent in making poets. We often hear of this and the other external condition being requisite for the existence of a poet. Sometimes it is a certain sort of training; he must have studied certain things,—studied, for instance, "the elder dramatists,"<sup>4</sup> and so learned a poetic language; as if poetry lay in the tongue, not in the heart! At other times we are told he must be bred in a certain rank, and must be on a confidential footing with the higher classes; because, above all

<sup>1</sup> A Latin word meaning "poet" or "prophet."

<sup>2</sup> The ancient oracle of Apollo in Phocis, Greece. The oracular sayings, supposed to be inspired by vapor rising from a hole in the ground, were always delivered in poetry.

<sup>3</sup> A printing establishment in Leadenhall Street, London, which early in the century issued novels full of affected and pernicious sentimentalism.

<sup>4</sup> That group of dramatists (Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, etc.) who, with Shakespeare at their head, made the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. the golden age of English poetic drama.

things, he must see the world. As to seeing the world, we apprehend this will cause him little difficulty, if he have but eyesight to see it with. Without eyesight, indeed, the task might be hard. The blind or the purblind man "travels from Dan to Beersheba<sup>1</sup> and finds it all barren." But, happily, every poet is born in the world and sees it, with or against his will, every day and every hour he lives. The mysterious workmanship of man's heart, the true light and the inscrutable darkness of man's destiny, reveal themselves not only in capital cities and crowded saloons, but in every hut and hamlet where men have their abode. Nay; do not the elements of all human virtues and all human vices, the passions at once of a Borgia<sup>2</sup> and of a Luther,<sup>3</sup> lie written, in stronger or fainter lines, in the consciousness of every individual bosom that has practiced honest self-examination? Truly, this same world may be seen in Mossgiel<sup>4</sup> and Tarbolton,<sup>5</sup> if we look well, as clearly as it ever came to light in Crockford's<sup>6</sup> or the Tuilleries<sup>7</sup> itself.

But sometimes still harder requisitions are laid on the poor aspirant to poetry; for it is hinted that he should have been born

<sup>1</sup> "From Dan to Beersheba" is a scriptural expression meaning from one end of the kingdom to the other; all over the world. Dan was the most northern, and Beersheba the most southern, city of Palestine.

<sup>2</sup> A Spanish family which, during the fifteenth century, attained a "bad eminence" in Italy. The members most famous for evil and murderous passions were the Pope Alexander VI., and his children, Cæsar and Lucrezia.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther (1483-1546), the German monk whose passionate protest against the sale of indulgences grew into opposition to the papal supremacy, and brought about the Protestant Reformation.

<sup>4</sup> The farm where Burns spent the greater part of his life.

<sup>5</sup> A small town in Ayr County, Scotland.

<sup>6</sup> A famous and fashionable gambling club existing in London from 1827 to 1844. It was named after the proprietor, who became a millionaire at the cost of numberless ruined families.

<sup>7</sup> A royal palace in Paris, connected with the Louvre, begun by Catherine de' Medici in 1564, and burned by the Commune in 1871. After 1789, when Louis XVI. was forced to move to it from Versailles, it was the chief royal residence.

two centuries ago, inasmuch as poetry about that date vanished from the earth and became no longer attainable by men! Such cobweb speculations have, now and then, overhung the field of literature; but they obstruct not the growth of any plant there. The Shakespeare or the Burns, unconsciously and merely as he walks onward, silently brushes them away. Is not every genius an impossibility till he appear? Why do we call him new and original if we saw where his marble was lying and what fabric he could rear from it? It is not the material but the workman that is wanting. It is not the dark place that hinders, but the dim eye. A Scottish peasant's life was the meanest and rudest of all lives till Burns became a poet in it and a poet of it; found it a man's life, and therefore significant to men. A thousand battlefields remain unsung, but the "Wounded Hare"<sup>1</sup> has not perished without its memorial. A balm of mercy yet breathes on us from its dumb agonies, because a poet was there. Our Halloween<sup>2</sup> had passed and repassed in rude awe and laughter since the era of the druids,<sup>3</sup> but no Theocritus<sup>4</sup> till Burns discerned in it the materials of a Scottish idyl. Neither was the "Holy Fair"<sup>5</sup> any Council of Trent<sup>6</sup> or Roman Jubilee,<sup>7</sup> but, nevertheless, Superstition<sup>8</sup> and Hypocrisy<sup>8</sup> and Fun<sup>8</sup> having been propitious to

<sup>1</sup> See poem, On Seeing a Wounded Hare Limp by Me.

<sup>2</sup> The night before the feast of Allhallows or All Saints, the 1st of November. See Burns's poem of that name for the traditions and spells of that night.

<sup>3</sup> The priests of the Celtic inhabitants of Gaul and Britain, from whose mystic rites of divination many of the ceremonies of Halloween are probably derived.

<sup>4</sup> The greatest of the Greek pastoral poets, noted for his Idyllia, or pictures of actual life. He lived in Alexandria in the third century B.C.

<sup>5</sup> The term used in the west of Scotland for a sacramental occasion.

<sup>6</sup> The most celebrated of the ecumenical, or general, councils of the Roman Catholic Church, which was held at Trent, a city of the Tyrol, to decide on points at issue with the Reformers of the sixteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> A period recurring once in twenty-five years in the Roman Catholic Church, marked by indulgences granted by the Pope.

<sup>8</sup> Mythical personages whom Burns represents as inviting him to the Holy Fair.

him, in this man's hand it became a poem instinct with satire and genuine comic life. Let but the true poet be given us,—we repeat it,—place him where and how you will, and true poetry will not be wanting.

Independently of the essential gift of poetic feeling, as we have now attempted to describe it, a certain rugged, sterling worth pervades whatever Burns has written; a virtue, as of green fields and mountain breezes, dwells in his poetry; it is redolent of natural life and hardy, natural men. There is a decisive strength in him, and yet a sweet, native gracefulness. He is tender, he is vehement, yet without constraint or too visible effort; he melts the heart or inflames it with a power which seems habitual and familiar to him. We see that in this man there was the gentleness, the trembling pity of a woman, with the deep earnestness, the force and passionate ardor of a hero. Tears lie in him, and consuming fire, as lightning lurks in the drops of the summer cloud. He has a resonance in his bosom for every note of human feeling; the high and the low, the sad, the ludicrous, the joyful, are welcome in their turn to his “lightly moved and all-conceiving spirit.”

And observe with what a fierce, prompt force he grasps his subject, be it what it may! How he fixes, as it were, the full image of the matter in his eye, full and clear in every lineament, and catches the real type and essence of it amid a thousand accidents and superficial circumstances, no one of which misleads him! Is it of reason,—some truth to be discovered? No sophistry, no vain surface logic, detains him. Quick, resolute, unerring, he pierces through into the marrow of the question, and speaks his verdict with an emphasis that cannot be forgotten. Is it of description,—some visual object to be represented? No poet of any age or nation is more graphic than Burns. The characteristic features disclose themselves to him at a glance. Three lines from his hand, and we have a likeness, and, in that rough dialect, in that rude, often awkward meter, so clear and definite a likeness! It seems a draughtsman working

with a burnt stick ; and yet the burin<sup>1</sup> of a Retzsch<sup>2</sup> is not more expressive or exact.

Of this last excellence, the plainest and most comprehensive of all, being, indeed, the root and foundation of every sort of talent, poetical or intellectual, we could produce innumerable instances from the writings of Burns. Take these glimpses of a snowstorm from his "Winter Night" (the italics are ours) :

" When biting Boreas,<sup>3</sup> fell<sup>4</sup> and doure,<sup>5</sup>  
*Sharp shivers* thro' the leafless bow'r,  
 And Phœbus<sup>6</sup> gies<sup>7</sup> *a short-lived glow'r*,  
*Far south the lift,*<sup>8</sup>  
*Dim-dark'ning* thro' the flaky show'r,  
*Or whirling drift:*

" Ae<sup>9</sup> night the storm the steeples rock'd,  
 Poor labor sweet in sleep was lock'd,  
 While burns wi' snowy<sup>10</sup> wreaths upchok'd  
*Wild-eddying swirl,*  
 Or thro' the mining outlet bock'd<sup>11</sup>  
*Down headlong hurl."*

Are there not "descriptive touches" here? The describer saw this thing,—the essential feature and true likeness of every circumstance in it; saw, and not with the eye only. "Poor labor locked in sweet sleep;" the dead stillness of man, unconscious, vanquished, yet not unprotected, while such strife of the material elements rages and seems to reign supreme in loneliness. This is of the heart as well as of the eye! Look also at his image of a thaw, and prophesied fall of the "Auld Brig":<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An engraver's tool.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich August Moritz Retzsch (1779–1857), an eminent artist, best known for his engravings illustrative of the works of Goethe, Schiller, and Shakespeare.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek god of the north wind.

<sup>4</sup> Fierce; keen.      <sup>5</sup> Stubborn.      <sup>6</sup> Apollo, the Greek sun god.

<sup>7</sup> Gives.      <sup>8</sup> Sky.      <sup>9</sup> One.      <sup>10</sup> Snowy.      <sup>11</sup> Vomited.

<sup>12</sup> See the poem, The Brigs of Ayr, written on the erection, in 1788, of the New Brig (bridge) in the town of Ayr, across the river of the same name. This passage, in which the Auld Brig prophesies the fall of the less bulky New Brig, Carlyle by an oversight quotes as an address to the Auld Brig.

" When heavy, dark, continued, a'-day rains  
 Wi' deepening deluges o'erflow the plains ;  
 When from the hills where springs the brawling Coil,<sup>1</sup>  
 Or stately Lugar's<sup>1</sup> mossy fountains boil,  
 Or where the Greenock<sup>1</sup> winds his moorland course,  
 Or haunted Garpal<sup>1</sup> draws his feeble source,  
 Arous'd by blust'ring winds and spotting thowes,<sup>2</sup>  
*In mony*<sup>3</sup> a torrent down his snaw-broo<sup>4</sup> rows,<sup>5</sup>  
*While crashing ice, borne on the roaring spate,*<sup>6</sup>  
*Sweeps dams and mills and brigs*<sup>7</sup> a<sup>8</sup> to the gate,<sup>9</sup>  
 And, from Glenbuck<sup>10</sup> down to the Rattenkey,<sup>11</sup>  
 Auld Ayr is just one lengthen'd tumbling sea ;  
 Then down ye'll hurl, deil,<sup>12</sup> nor ye never rise !  
 And dash the gumlie jaups<sup>13</sup> up to the pouring skies."

The last line is in itself a Poussin<sup>14</sup> picture of that deluge ! The welkin has, as it were, bent down with its weight ; the "gumlie jaups" and the "pouring skies" are mingled together ; it is a world of rain and ruin. In respect of mere clearness and minute fidelity, the Farmer's commendation of his "auld mare" in plow or in cart may vie with Homer's Smithy of the Cyclops,<sup>15</sup> or yoking of Priam's Chariot.<sup>16</sup> Nor have we forgotten stout "Burn-the-wind"<sup>17</sup> and his brawny customers, inspired by "Scotch Drink." But it is needless to multiply examples. One other trait of a much finer sort we select from multitudes of such

<sup>1</sup> Tributaries of the Ayr. The "haunted Garpal," Burns says in a note, "is one of the few places in the west of Scotland where those fancy-scaring beings, . . . ghaists, still . . . inhabit." Carlyle, in a footnote, parallels the phrase with the "*fabulosus Hydaspes*" ("storied Hydaspes") of Horace (see Book I. Ode XXII.).

<sup>2</sup> Thaws.            <sup>3</sup> Many.            <sup>4</sup> Water.            <sup>5</sup> Rolls.

<sup>6</sup> Flood.            <sup>7</sup> Bridges.            <sup>8</sup> All.            <sup>9</sup> Road.

<sup>10</sup> BURNS'S NOTE.—The source of the river Ayr.

<sup>11</sup> BURNS'S NOTE.—A small landing place above the large quay.

<sup>12</sup> Devil.            <sup>13</sup> "Gumlie jaups," i.e., muddy splashes.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), a celebrated French painter. His chief works are rather gloomy landscapes with classical figures.

<sup>15</sup> See Homer's Iliad, Book XVIII.

<sup>16</sup> See Iliad, Book XXIV.

<sup>17</sup> A Scotch term for a blacksmith (see poem, Scotch Drink).

among his "Songs." It gives in a single line to the saddest feeling the saddest environment and local habitation :

" *The pale Moon is setting beyond the white wave,  
And Time is setting wi' me, O;  
Farewell, false friends! false lover, farewell!  
I'll nae mair<sup>1</sup> trouble them nor thee, O.*"

This clearness of sight we have called the foundation of all talent ; for, in fact, unless we see our object, how shall we know how to place or prize it in our understanding, our imagination, our affections ? Yet it is not in itself, perhaps, a very high excellence, but capable of being united indifferently with the strongest or with ordinary power. Homer surpasses all men in this quality ; but, strangely enough, at no great distance below him are Richardson<sup>2</sup> and Defoe.<sup>3</sup> It belongs, in truth, to what is called a lively mind, and gives no sure indication of the higher endowments that may exist along with it. In all the three cases we have mentioned, it is combined with great garrulity. Their descriptions are detailed, ample, and lovingly exact. Homer's fire bursts through from time to time, as if by accident, but Defoe and Richardson have no fire. Burns, again, is not more distinguished by the clearness than by the impetuous force of his conceptions. Of the strength, the piercing emphasis with which he thought, his emphasis of expression may give a humble, but the readiest, proof. Who ever uttered sharper sayings than his,—words more memorable, now by their burning vehemence, now by their cool vigor and laconic pith ? A single phrase depicts a whole subject, a whole scene. We hear of "a gentleman that derived his patent of nobility direct from Almighty God." Our

<sup>1</sup> "Nae mair," i.e., no more.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), "father" of the modern English novel. His works, Pamela, Clarissa Harlowe, and Sir Charles Grandison, are remarkable for their length and minute detail.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Defoe (1661-1731), a voluminous writer of pamphlets and works of fiction, unexcelled for the picturing of imaginary events in the colors of truth. His best-known production is Robinson Crusoe.

Scottish forefathers in the battlefield struggled forward "red-wat-shod,"<sup>1</sup>—in this one word a full vision of horror and carnage, perhaps too frightfully accurate for art!

In fact, one of the leading features in the mind of Burns is this vigor of his strictly intellectual perceptions. A resolute force is ever visible in his judgments and in his feelings and volitions. Professor Stewart<sup>2</sup> says of him, with some surprise: "All the faculties of Burns's mind were, as far as I could judge, equally vigorous; and his predilection for poetry was rather the result of his own enthusiastic and impassioned temper than of a genius exclusively adapted to that species of composition. From his conversation I should have pronounced him to be fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities." But this, if we mistake not, is at all times the very essence of a truly poetical endowment. Poetry, except in such cases as that of Keats,<sup>3</sup> where the whole consists in a weak-eyed, maudlin sensibility, and a certain vague, random tunefulness of nature, is no separate faculty, no organ which can be superadded to the rest or disjoined from them; but rather the result of their general harmony and completion. The feelings, the gifts, that exist in the poet are those that exist, with more or less development, in every human soul; the imagination which shudders at the hell of Dante<sup>4</sup> is the same faculty, weaker in degree, which called that picture into being. How does the poet speak to men with power but by being still more a man than they? Shakespeare, it has been well observed, in the planning and completing of his tragedies, has shown an understanding, were it nothing more, which

<sup>1</sup> With shoes wet with blood.

<sup>2</sup> Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), a Scotch philosophical writer, and for some time professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> John Keats (1796–1821), author of *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, and some of the noblest odes in English. Carlyle's contemptuous estimate of him is misleading. Matthew Arnold ranked him as "by his promise, at any rate, . . . one of the very greatest of English poets."

<sup>4</sup> In the *Inferno*, or first part of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, he represents himself as led by Virgil to behold the tortures of the damned.

might have governed states or indited a "Novum Organum."<sup>1</sup> What Burns's force of understanding may have been we have less means of judging. It had to dwell among the humblest objects; never saw philosophy; never rose, except by natural effort and for short intervals, into the region of great ideas. Nevertheless sufficient indication, if no proof sufficient, remains for us in his works. We discern the brawny movements of a gigantic though untutored strength, and can understand how in conversation his quick, sure insight into men and things may, as much as aught else about him, have amazed the best thinkers of his time and country.

But, unless we mistake, the intellectual gift of Burns is fine as well as strong. The more delicate relations of things could not well have escaped his eye, for they were intimately present to his heart. The logic of the senate and the forum is indispensable, but not all-sufficient; nay, perhaps the highest truth is that which will the most certainly elude it. For this logic works by words, and "the highest," it has been said, "cannot be expressed in words." We are not without tokens of an openness for this higher truth also, of a keen though uncultivated sense for it having existed in Burns. Mr. Stewart, it will be remembered, wonders, in the passage above quoted, that Burns had formed some distinct conception of the "doctrine of association."<sup>2</sup> We rather think that far subtler things than the doctrine of association had from of old been familiar to him. Here, for instance:

"We know nothing," thus writes he, "or next to nothing, of the structure of our souls, so we cannot account for those seeming caprices in them, that one should be particularly pleased with this thing, or struck with that, which on minds of a different cast makes no extraordinary impression. I have some favorite flowers

<sup>1</sup> Literally "the new instrument," the great treatise on the new logic, or inductive method of reasoning, by Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, printed in 1620.

<sup>2</sup> The doctrine treating of that connection between ideas by virtue of which they succeed each other spontaneously in the mind.

in spring, among which are the mountain daisy, the harebell, the foxglove, the wild-brier rose, the budding birch, and the hoary hawthorn, that I view and hang over with particular delight. I never hear the loud, solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild, mixing cadence of a troop of gray plover in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry. Tell me, my dear friend, to what can this be owing? Are we a piece of machinery which, like the æolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident? or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod? I own myself partial to such proofs of those awful and important realities: a God that made all things, man's immaterial and immortal nature, and a world of weal or woe beyond death and the grave."

Force and fineness of understanding are often spoken of as something different from general force and fineness of nature, as something partly independent of them. The necessities of language so require it; but in truth these qualities are not distinct and independent; except in special cases and from special causes, they ever go together. A man of strong understanding is generally a man of strong character; neither is delicacy in the one kind often divided from delicacy in the other. No one, at all events, is ignorant that in the poetry of Burns keenness of insight keeps pace with keenness of feeling; that his light is not more pervading than his warmth. He is a man of the most impassioned temper, with passions not strong only, but noble, and of the sort in which great virtues and great poems take their rise. It is reverence, it is love toward all nature that inspires him, that opens his eyes to its beauty, and makes heart and voice eloquent in its praise. There is a true old saying that "love furthers knowledge;" but, above all, it is the living essence of that knowledge which makes poets; the first principle of its existence, increase, activity. Of Burns's fervid affection, his generous, all-embracing love, we have spoken already, as of the grand distinction of his nature, seen equally in word and deed, in his life and in his writings. It were

easy to multiply examples. Not man only, but all that environs man in the material and moral universe, is lovely in his sight. The "hoary hawthorn," the "troop of gray plover," the "solitary curlew,"—all are dear to him; all live in this earth along with him, and to all he is knit as in mysterious brotherhood. How touching is it, for instance, that, amidst the gloom of personal misery, brooding over the wintry desolation without him and within him, he thinks of the "ourie<sup>1</sup> cattle" and "silly<sup>2</sup> sheep," and their sufferings in the pitiless storm!

" I thought me on the ourie cattle,  
 Or silly sheep, wha<sup>3</sup> bide this brattle<sup>4</sup>  
     O' wintry war,  
 And thro' the drift, deep-lairing,<sup>5</sup> sprattle<sup>6</sup>  
     Beneath a scar.<sup>7</sup>  
 Ilk<sup>8</sup> happing<sup>9</sup> bird, wee helpless thing!  
 That in the merry months o' spring  
 Delighted me to hear thee sing,  
     What comes o' thee?  
 Where wilt thou cow'r thy chittering<sup>10</sup> wing  
     And close thy ee?"<sup>11</sup>

The tenant of the mean hut, with its "ragged roof and chinky wall," has a heart to pity even these. This is worth several homilies on mercy, for it is the voice of Mercy herself. Burns, indeed, lives in sympathy; his soul rushes forth into all realms of being; nothing that has existence can be indifferent to him. The very devil he cannot hate with right orthodoxy:

" But fare you weel, auld Nickie-ben;<sup>12</sup>  
 O, wad<sup>13</sup> ye tak' a thought and men'!<sup>14</sup>  
 Ye aiblins<sup>15</sup> might—I dinna ken<sup>16</sup>—

<sup>1</sup> Shivering.      <sup>2</sup> Simple; innocent.      <sup>3</sup> Who.      <sup>4</sup> A brief contest.

<sup>5</sup> Deep-wading.      <sup>6</sup> Struggle.      <sup>7</sup> Protruding rock.

<sup>8</sup> Each.      <sup>9</sup> Hopping.      <sup>10</sup> Trembling with cold.

<sup>11</sup> Eye. The extract is from *A Winter Night*.

<sup>12</sup> The devil is popularly called "Old Nick," from the nix, or nick, in Northern mythology, an evil spirit of the waters.      <sup>13</sup> Would.

<sup>14</sup> Mend.      <sup>15</sup> Perhaps.      <sup>16</sup> "Dinna ken," i.e., do not know.

Still hae<sup>1</sup> a stake;  
I'm wae<sup>2</sup> to think upo' yon den,  
Ev'n for your sake!"<sup>3</sup>

"He is the father of curses and lies," said Dr. Slop,<sup>4</sup> "and is cursed and damned already." "I am sorry for it," quoth my Uncle Toby.<sup>5</sup> A poet without love were a physical and metaphysical impossibility.

But has it not been said, in contradiction to this principle, that "indignation makes verses?"<sup>6</sup> It has been so said, and is true enough; but the contradiction is apparent, not real. The indignation which makes verses is, properly speaking, an inverted love; the love of some right, some worth, some goodness, belonging to ourselves or others, which has been injured, and which this tempestuous feeling issues forth to defend and avenge. No selfish fury of heart, existing there as a primary feeling and without its opposite, ever produced much poetry; otherwise, we suppose, the tiger were the most musical of all our choristers. Johnson<sup>7</sup> said he loved a good hater;<sup>8</sup> by which he must have meant not so much one that hated violently as one that hated wisely, hated baseness from love of nobleness. However, in spite of Johnson's paradox, tolerable enough for once in speech, but which need not

<sup>1</sup> Have.

<sup>2</sup> Unhappy.

<sup>3</sup> An extract from Address to the Deil.

<sup>4</sup> A morose physician in Sterne's novel, *Tristram Shandy*.

<sup>5</sup> The hero of *Tristram Shandy*, called by Hazlitt "one of the finest compliments ever paid to human nature, . . . the most unoffending of God's creatures."

<sup>6</sup> A translation of the Latin "*facit indignatio versus*" of Juvenal, a Roman satirist.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-84), author of *Rasselas*, *The Rambler*, *The Idler*, *Lives of the Poets*, and a *Dictionary*, together with many other works in poetry and prose, was the most impressive literary figure of his time, but is best known by his conversations, recorded in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> His words were: "Dear Bathurst was a man to my very heart's content. He hated a fool, and he hated a rogue, and he hated a Whig; he was a very good hater" (see Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes of Dr. Johnson*).

have been so often adopted in print since then, we rather believe that good men deal sparingly in hatred, either wise or unwise; nay, that a "good" hater is still a desideratum in this world. The devil, at least, who passes for the chief and best of that class, is said to be nowise an amiable character.

Of the verses which indignation makes, Burns has also given us specimens, and among the best that were ever given. Who will forget his "Dweller in yon dungeon dark,"<sup>1</sup> a piece that might have been chanted by the Furies of Æschylus?<sup>2</sup> The secrets of the infernal pit are laid bare,—a boundless, baleful "darkness visible,"<sup>3</sup> and streaks of hell fire quivering madly in its black, haggard bosom!

" Dweller in yon dungeon dark,  
Hangman of creation, mark!  
Who in widow's weeds appears,  
Laden with unhonor'd years,  
Noosing with care a bursting purse,  
Baited with many a deadly curse!"<sup>4</sup>

Why should we speak of "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled,"<sup>5</sup> since all know of it, from the King to the meanest of his subjects? This dithyrambic<sup>6</sup> was composed on horseback, in riding in the

<sup>1</sup> See Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald.

<sup>2</sup> The most powerful of the Greek tragic poets. In one of his tragedies he depicts the Furies, or Eumenides, Greek goddesses of vengeance, in their pursuit of Orestes for the murder of his mother.

<sup>3</sup> See Milton's description of hell, *Paradise Lost*, Book I.:

" Yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe."

<sup>4</sup> The apparently inadequate occasion of this wrath was the elaborate funeral pageant of Mrs. Oswald, by which Burns was crowded out of his inn and obliged to ride a long distance on a stormy night in 1788.

<sup>5</sup> The first line of the poem *Bannockburn*: Robert Bruce's Address to his Army. "A tradition," writes Burns (September, 1793), "that a certain old air was . . . Bruce's march at the battle of Bannockburn . . . in my solitary wanderings warmed me to a pitch of enthusiasm on the theme of liberty, . . . which I threw into a kind of Scottish ode fitted to the air."

<sup>6</sup> A poem written in a wild, irregular strain.

middle of tempests over the wildest Galloway moor,<sup>1</sup> in company with a Mr. Syme,<sup>2</sup> who, observing the poet's looks, forbore to speak,—judiciously enough, for a man composing “Bruce's Address” might be unsafe to trifle with. Doubtless this stern hymn was singing itself, as he formed it, through the soul of Burns; but to the external ear it should be sung with the throat of the whirlwind. So long as there is warm blood in the heart of Scotchman or man it will move in fierce thrills under this war ode, the best, we believe, that was ever written by any pen.

Another wild, stormful song, that dwells in our ear and mind with a strange tenacity, is “M'Pherson's Farewell.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps there is something in the tradition itself that coöperates. For was not this grim Celt,<sup>4</sup> this shaggy northland Cacus,<sup>5</sup> that “lived a life of sturt<sup>6</sup> and strife, and died by treacherie,”—was not he, too, one of the Nimrods<sup>7</sup> and Napoleons of the earth, in the arena of his own remote, misty glens, for want of a clearer and wider one? Nay, was there not a touch of grace given him? A fiber of love and softness, of poetry itself, must have lived in his savage heart; for he composed that air the night before his execution. On the wings of that poor melody his better soul would soar away above oblivion, pain, and all the ignominy and despair which, like an

<sup>1</sup> Galloway, in the southwestern corner of Scotland, contains much barren moorland, especially in the north near Ayrshire.

<sup>2</sup> A favorite companion of Burns.

<sup>3</sup> M'Pherson, a Highland freebooter of great strength and some musical skill, composed a Farewell while lying under sentence of death, and at the gallows' foot played it and then broke his violin over his knee.

<sup>4</sup> Until the middle of the last century the wild people of the Highlands were exclusively Gaelic, being descended from the aboriginal Celtic Britons.

<sup>5</sup> A half-human monster who, before Æneas's arrival in Italy, inhabited a cave on the site of Rome. Having stolen some of the oxen of Alcides (Hercules), he was strangled by the hero after a mighty struggle (see Virgil's *Æneid*, Book VIII. lines 190–270).

<sup>6</sup> Violence.

<sup>7</sup> Nimrod was the “mighty hunter” said to have founded Babel, or Babylon, after the deluge (see Gen. x. 8–10).

avalanche, was hurling him to the abyss. Here, also, as at Thebes<sup>1</sup> and in Pelops'<sup>1</sup> line, was material Fate matched against man's Free Will, matched in bitterest, though obscure, duel; and the ethereal soul sank not, even in its blindness, without a cry which has survived it. But who, except Burns, could have given words to such a soul,—words that we never listen to without a strange, half-barbarous, half-poetic fellow-feeling?

“ Sae<sup>2</sup> rantingly, sae wantonly,  
Sae dauntingly gaed<sup>3</sup> he;  
He play'd a spring<sup>4</sup> and danced it round  
Below the gallows tree.”<sup>5</sup>

Under a lighter disguise, the same principle of love, which we have recognized as the great characteristic of Burns, and of all true poets, occasionally manifests itself in the shape of humor. Everywhere, indeed, in his sunny moods, a full, buoyant flood of mirth rolls through the mind of Burns; he rises to the high and stoops to the low, and is brother and playmate to all Nature. We speak not of his bold and often irresistible faculty of caricature, for this is drollery rather than humor; but a much tenderer sportfulness dwells in him, and comes forth here and there in evanescent and beautiful touches, as in his “Address to the Mouse,” or the “Farmer's Mare,”<sup>6</sup> or in his “Elegy on Poor Mailie,”<sup>7</sup> which last may be reckoned his happiest effort of this kind. In these

<sup>1</sup> These were two favorite subjects of Greek tragedy. “Thebes” stood for the stories relating to Oedipus, King of Thebes, who blinded himself on discovering that he had ignorantly killed his father, as had been foretold at his birth; “Pelops' line,” for those relating to Agamemnon, grandson of Pelops (see Milton's *Il Penseroso*, lines 97–99).

<sup>2</sup> So.

<sup>3</sup> Went.

<sup>4</sup> Tune.

<sup>5</sup> Burns has adapted the refrain of M'Pherson's own song:

“ But dantonly and wantonly  
And rantonly I gae;  
I'll play a tune and dance it roun'  
Beneath the gallows tree.”

<sup>6</sup> The Auld Farmer's New-Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare Maggie.

<sup>7</sup> Mailie was Burns's pet ewe.

pieces there are traits of a humor as fine as that of Sterne,<sup>1</sup> yet altogether different, original, peculiar—the humor of Burns.

Of the tenderness, the playful pathos, and many other kindred qualities of Burns's poetry, much more might be said; but now, with these poor outlines of a sketch, we must prepare to quit this part of our subject. To speak of his individual writings adequately and with any detail would lead us far beyond our limits. As already hinted, we can look on but few of these pieces as, in strict critical language, deserving the name of poems; they are rhymed eloquence, rhymed pathos, rhymed sense, yet seldom essentially melodious, aërial, poetical. "Tam o' Shanter"<sup>2</sup> itself, which enjoys so high a favor, does not appear to us at all decisively to come under this last category. It is not so much a poem as a piece of sparkling rhetoric; the heart and body of the story still lies hard and dead. He has not gone back, much less carried us back, into that dark, earnest, wondering age when the tradition was believed and when it took its rise; he does not attempt by any new modeling of his supernatural ware to strike anew that deep, mysterious chord of human nature which once responded to such things, and which lives in us too, and will forever live, though silent now, or vibrating with far other notes and to far different issues. Our German readers will understand us when we say that he is not the Tieck,<sup>3</sup> but the Musäus,<sup>4</sup> of this tale. Externally it

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Sterne (1713–68), an English clergyman, author of *Tristram Shandy*, and the *Sentimental Journey*. The latter is called by Carlyle "our finest, if not our strongest," specimen of humor.

<sup>2</sup> Called by Burns "my standard performance in the poetical line," and certainly the most famous of his long poems.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), a German romance writer and translator of great influence, best known by his *Märchen*, or Popular Traditional Tales. "These constituted," says Carlyle, "his own peculiar province, to reign in which was to penetrate into the inmost shrines of Imagination."

<sup>4</sup> Johann K. A. Musäus (1735–87), a German collector of *Volksmärchen*, which he often used, however, merely as a vehicle for pleasantries of his own. Carlyle says, in his *German Romance*: "The traces of poetry and earnest imagination here and there discernible in the original fiction, he treats with levity and kind, skeptical derision."

is all green and living; yet look closer, it is no firm growth, but only ivy on a rock. The piece does not properly cohere; the strange chasm which yawns in our incredulous imaginations between the Ayr public house<sup>1</sup> and the gate of Tophet<sup>2</sup> is nowhere bridged over; nay, the idea of such a bridge is laughed at; and thus the tragedy of the adventure becomes a mere drunken phantasmagoria, or many-colored spectrum painted on ale vapors, and the farce alone has any reality. We do not say that Burns should have made much more of this tradition;<sup>3</sup> we rather think that, for strictly poetical purposes, not much was to be made of it. Neither are we blind to the deep, varied, genial power displayed in what he has actually accomplished; but we find far more "Shakespearean" qualities, as these of "Tam o' Shanter" have been fondly named, in many of his other pieces; nay, we incline to believe that this latter might have been written all but quite as well by a man who, in place of genius, had only possessed talent.

Perhaps we may venture to say that the most strictly poetical of all his "poems" is one which does not appear in Currie's edition, but has been often printed before and since under the humble title of "The Jolly Beggars." The subject truly is among the lowest in nature; but it only the more shows our poet's gift in raising it into the domain of art. To our minds this piece seems thoroughly compacted, melted together, refined, and poured forth in one flood of true, liquid harmony. It is light, airy, soft of movement, yet sharp and precise in its details; every face is a portrait. That "raucle carlin,"<sup>4</sup> that "wee Apollo,"<sup>5</sup> that "son

<sup>1</sup> The cause of "Tam's" late homeward journey.

<sup>2</sup> Hell; so called from the Hebrew Tophet, or place of fire, a valley where idolatrous rites were practiced.

<sup>3</sup> The tradition that Alloway Kirk, near Ayr, was haunted by witches, where a midnight dance was once seen by a belated farmer, who, on his applauding, was pursued by the witches to the middle of the river. There, as diabolical pursuit can never go beyond the middle of a stream, they were checked, with no booty but his horse's tail.

<sup>4</sup> Bold old woman.

<sup>5</sup> "A pygmy Scraper wi' his fiddle."

of Mars,"<sup>1</sup> are Scottish, yet ideal; the scene is at once a dream and the very Ragcastle of "Poosie-Nansie."<sup>2</sup> Further, it seems in a considerable degree complete, a real, self-supporting whole, which is the highest merit in a poem. The blanket of the night is drawn asunder for a moment; in full, ruddy, flaming light these rough tatterdemalions are seen in their boisterous revel, for the strong pulse of life vindicates its right to gladness even here, and when the curtain closes we prolong the action without effort. The next day, as the last, our "Caird"<sup>3</sup> and our "Ballad Monger"<sup>4</sup> are singing and soldiering; their "brats and calleets"<sup>5</sup> are hawking, begging, cheating; and some other night, in new combinations, they will wring from Fate another hour of wassail and good cheer. Apart from the universal sympathy with man which this again bespeaks in Burns, a genuine inspiration and no inconsiderable technical talent are manifested here. There is the fidelity, humor, warm life, and accurate painting and grouping of some Teniers,<sup>6</sup> for whom hostlers and carousing peasants are not without significance. It would be strange, doubtless, to call this the best of Burns's writings. We mean to say only that it seems to us the most perfect of its kind as a piece of poetical composition, strictly so called. In the "Beggars' Opera,"<sup>7</sup> in the "Beggars' Bush,"<sup>8</sup> as other critics have already remarked, there is nothing which in real poetic vigor equals this cantata; nothing, as we think, which comes within many degrees of it.

<sup>1</sup> An old soldier reduced to beggary.

<sup>2</sup> The keeper of a tavern in Mauchline, which was a favorite haunt of vagrants of all kinds. <sup>3</sup> A Scotch term for a tinker.

<sup>4</sup> A wandering singer. <sup>5</sup> Children and scolding women.

<sup>6</sup> David Teniers, the name borne by two Flemish painters of genre pieces, i.e., pictures of fairs, alehouse scenes, etc., of whom the son (1610-85) is the more famous.

<sup>7</sup> The first English comic opera, written by John Gay (1688-1732), and picturing in a realistic, yet entertaining, manner the life of thieves and beggars.

<sup>8</sup> A melodramatic comedy by John Fletcher (1576-1625), introducing real and pretended vagabonds, and rich in "thieves' gibberish."

But by far the most finished, complete, and truly inspired pieces of Burns are, without dispute, to be found among his "Songs." It is here that, although through a small aperture, his light shines with least obstruction in its highest beauty, and pure, sunny clearness. The reason may be that song is a brief, simple species of composition, and requires nothing so much for its perfection as genuine poetic feeling, genuine music of heart. Yet the song has its rules equally with the tragedy, rules which in most cases are poorly fulfilled, in many cases are not so much as felt. We might write a long essay on the songs of Burns, which we reckon by far the best that Britain has yet produced; for, indeed, since the era of Queen Elizabeth we know not that by any other hand aught truly worth attention has been accomplished in this department. True, we have songs enough "by persons of quality;" we have tawdry, hollow, wine-bred madrigals; many a rhymed speech "in the flowing and watery vein of Ossorius, the Portugal bishop,"<sup>1</sup> rich in sonorous words, and for moral dashed, perhaps, with some tint of a sentimental sensuality; all which many persons cease not from endeavoring to sing, though for most part, we fear, the music is but from the throat outward, or at best from some region far enough short of the soul; not in which, but in a certain inane limbo<sup>2</sup> of the fancy, or even in some vaporous debatable land on the outskirts of the nervous system, most of such madrigals and rhymed speeches seem to have originated.

With the songs of Burns we must not name these things. Independently of the clear, manly, heartfelt sentiment that ever pervades his poetry, his songs are honest in another point of view,—in form as well as in spirit. They do not affect to be set to

<sup>1</sup> From Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, Book I. Bishop Jeronymo Osorio (1506–80), called for his excellent Latin style the "Cicero of Portugal," wrote an Address to Queen Elizabeth on the True Faith.

<sup>2</sup> Limbo, from Latin *limbus* ("border"), was, in mediæval theology, a place on the borders of hell for those who, being guiltless, but unbaptized, were unfit for either hell or heaven (see Dante's *Inferno*, Canto IV.). Milton, following popular fancy, made it the receptacle of all vain triflers, the "paradise of fools" (see *Paradise Lost*, Book III. line 496).

music, but they actually and in themselves are music ; they have received their life and fashioned themselves together in the medium of harmony, as Venus rose from the bosom of the sea.<sup>1</sup> The story, the feeling, is not detailed, but suggested ; not said, or spouted, in rhetorical completeness and coherence, but sung in fitful gushes, in glowing hints, in fantastic breaks, in warblings, not of the voice only, but of the whole mind. We consider this to be the essence of a song, and that no songs since the little careless catches and, as it were, drops of song which Shakespeare has here and there sprinkled over his plays, fulfill this condition in nearly the same degree as most of Burns's do. Such grace and truth of external movement, too, presupposes in general a corresponding force and truth of sentiment and inward meaning. The songs of Burns are not more perfect in the former quality than in the latter. With what tenderness he sings, yet with what vehemence and entireness ! There is a piercing wail in his sorrow, the purest rapture in his joy ; he burns with the sternest ire, or laughs with the loudest or slyest mirth ; and yet he is sweet and soft,—“sweet as the smile when fond lovers meet, and soft as their parting tear.” If we further take into account the immense variety of his subjects,—how, from the loud, flowing revel in “Willie brew'd a peck o' maut,”<sup>2</sup> to the still, rapt enthusiasm of sadness for “Mary in Heaven ;”<sup>3</sup> from the glad, kind greeting of “Auld Lang Syne,” or the comic archness of “Duncan Gray,” to the fire-eyed fury of “Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled,” he has found a tone and words for every mood of man's heart,—it will seem a small praise if we rank him as the first of all our song writers ; for we know not where to find one worthy of being second to him.

It is on his songs, as we believe, that Burns's chief influence as an author will ultimately be found to depend ; nor, if our Fletcher's aphorism is true, shall we account this a small influence. “Let

<sup>1</sup> Venus, or Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, was said to have been born of the sea foam.

<sup>2</sup> Malt (see poem, *The Happy Trio*).

<sup>3</sup> Written about three years after the death of his Highland Mary.

me make the songs of a people," said he, "and you shall make its laws."<sup>1</sup> Surely if ever any poet might have equaled himself with legislators on this ground it was Burns. His songs are already part of the mother tongue, not of Scotland only, but of Britain and of the millions that in all ends of the earth speak a British language. In hut and hall, as the heart unfolds itself in many-colored joy and woe of existence, the name, the voice of that joy and that woe is the name and voice which Burns has given them. Strictly speaking, perhaps no British man has so deeply affected the thoughts and feelings of so many men as this solitary and altogether private individual, with means apparently the humblest.

In another point of view, moreover, we incline to think that Burns's influence may have been considerable. We mean as exerted specially on the literature of his country, at least on the literature of Scotland. Among the great changes which British, particularly Scottish, literature has undergone since that period, one of the greatest will be found to consist in its remarkable increase of nationality. Even the English writers most popular in Burns's time were little distinguished for their literary patriotism, in this its best sense. A certain attenuated cosmopolitanism had in good measure taken place of the old insular, home feeling. Literature was, as it were, without any local environment, was not nourished by the affections which spring from a native soil. Our Grays<sup>2</sup> and Glovers<sup>3</sup> seemed to write almost as if *in vacuo*.<sup>4</sup> The thing written bears no mark of place; it is not written so

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Fletcher (1665-1716), a prominent orator and member of the Scotch Parliament. This often misquoted passage, which occurs in a public letter to the Marquis of Montrose, runs thus: "I knew a very wise man that believed that if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws, of a nation."

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Gray (1716-71), one of the most polished and classical of English poets, and author of *The Bard*, *The Progress of Poesy*, and the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Glover (1712-85), the scholarly poet of *Leonidas* and *The Athenaid*.

<sup>4</sup> In empty space.

much for Englishmen as for men, or rather, which is the inevitable result of this, for certain generalizations which philosophy termed men. Goldsmith<sup>1</sup> is an exception. Not so Johnson; the scene of his "Rambler"<sup>2</sup> is little more English than that of his "Rasselas."<sup>3</sup>

But if such was in some degree the case with England, it was in the highest degree the case with Scotland. In fact, our Scottish literature had at that period a very singular aspect, unexampled, so far as we know, except perhaps at Geneva, where the same state of matters appears still to continue. For a long period after Scotland became British we had no literature. At the date when Addison and Steele were writing their "Spectators,"<sup>4</sup> our good John Boston<sup>5</sup> was writing, with the noblest intent, but alike in defiance of grammar and philosophy, his "Fourfold State of Man." Then came the schisms in our national church<sup>6</sup> and the fiercer schisms in our body politic; theologic ink and Jacobite<sup>7</sup> blood, with gall enough in both cases, seemed to have blotted out the intellect of the country; however, it was only obscured, not obliterated. Lord Kames<sup>8</sup> made nearly the first attempt at

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Goldsmith (1728–74). His prose romance, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and his poem, *The Deserted Village*, are remarkable, as products of that classical age, for their genuine human feeling and local color.

<sup>2</sup> A periodical like the *Spectator*, professing to deal with contemporary English society.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson's one prose tale, the scene of which is laid in Abyssinia and Egypt, but whose tone of thought is by no means oriental.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Addison (1672–1719) and Sir Richard Steele (1675–1729) produced in partnership the periodical papers called the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, gently satirizing English society.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas (not John) Boston (1676–1732), a Calvinistic divine, whose *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* was published in 1720.

<sup>6</sup> Between 1733 and 1761 several secessions from the Scottish established church took place.

<sup>7</sup> The adherents of the deposed James II. (*Latin Jacobus*) and his son, revolted in Scotland in 1715, and again in 1745.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696–1782), a Scottish judge, whose best work, *The Elements of Criticism*, is the first attempt at scientific study of the metaphysical principles of the fine arts.

writing English ; and ere long Hume,<sup>1</sup> Robertson,<sup>2</sup> Smith,<sup>3</sup> and a whole host of followers, attracted hither the eyes of all Europe. And yet in this brilliant resuscitation of our "fervid genius" there was nothing truly Scottish, nothing indigenous ; except, perhaps, the natural impetuosity of intellect which we sometimes claim, and are sometimes upbraided with, as a characteristic of our nation. It is curious to remark that Scotland, so full of writers, had no Scottish culture, nor, indeed, any English ; our culture was almost exclusively French. It was by studying Racine<sup>4</sup> and Voltaire,<sup>5</sup> Batteux<sup>6</sup> and Boileau,<sup>7</sup> that Kames had trained himself to be a critic and philosopher ; it was the light of Montesquieu<sup>8</sup> and Mably<sup>9</sup> that guided Robertson in his political speculations ; Quesnay's<sup>10</sup> lamp that kindled the lamp of Adam Smith. Hume was too rich a man to borrow, and perhaps he reacted on the French more than he was acted on by them ; but neither had he

<sup>1</sup> David Hume (1711–76), a philosopher, and author of various Essays, a History of England, and *The Natural History of Religion*.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. William Robertson (1721–93), a minister, and author of famous histories of Scotland, the Emperor Charles V., and America.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Adam Smith (1723–90), a philosopher, on whose *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* is based the science of political economy.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Racine (1628–99), the most polished of the French classical dramatists.

<sup>5</sup> François Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778), the first French critic, philosopher, historian, and poet of his age, whose brilliant satire, though not atheistical, was highly skeptical and very destructive to current beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Batteux (1713–80), author of a *Treatise on the Fine Arts*.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711), a French poet, the chief critic of his time, and author of *Satires*, the *Lutrin*, and the famous *Art Poétique*.

<sup>8</sup> Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), a French philosophical writer, whose *Esprit des Lois* (*The Spirit of Laws*) became the basis of modern political science.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–85), a somewhat superficial French enthusiast for the republican systems of the ancients, of so great reputation in his own time that the American Congress invited him to write his *Observations on the Government and Laws of the United States* (1784).

<sup>10</sup> François Quesnay (1694–1774), a French physician, inventor of the term "political economy" and of the doctrine that natural laws may be safely

aught to do with Scotland. Edinburgh, equally with La Flèche,<sup>1</sup> was but the lodging and laboratory in which he not so much morally lived as metaphysically investigated. Never, perhaps, was there a class of writers so clear and well ordered, yet so totally destitute, to all appearance, of any patriotic affection, nay, of any human affection whatever. The French wits of the period were as unpatriotic ; but their general deficiency in moral principle, not to say their avowed sensuality and unbelief in all virtue, strictly so called, render this accountable enough. We hope there is a patriotism founded on something better than prejudice ; that our country may be dear to us without injury to our philosophy ; that in loving and justly prizes all other lands we may prize justly, and yet love before all others, our own stern motherland, and the venerable structure of social and moral life which mind has through long ages been building up for us there. Surely there is nourishment for the better part of man's heart in all this ; surely the roots that have fixed themselves in the very core of man's being may be so cultivated as to grow up, not into briars, but into roses, in the field of his life. Our Scottish sages have no such propensities ; the field of their life shows neither briars nor roses, but only a flat, continuous thrashing floor for logic, whereon all questions, from the "Doctrine of Rent"<sup>2</sup> to the "Natural History of Religion," are thrashed and sifted with the same mechanical impartiality.

With Sir Walter Scott<sup>3</sup> at the head of our literature, it cannot

trusted to regulate the material affairs of nations. This is sometimes called the doctrine of "laissez faire" ("let things go as they will").

<sup>1</sup> A French town to which Hume retired to live cheaply while writing his Treatise on Human Nature.

<sup>2</sup> The principle that the pressure of population on the means of subsistence creates rent, or an increase of value, on those lands where the means of subsistence may most easily be produced. This principle is developed into various theories.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), author of several poetical romances and the Waverley Novels, devoted a large proportion of his works to the contemporary life of his native Scotland. His popularity during the last twenty years of his life was great.

be denied that much of this evil is past, or rapidly passing away. Our chief literary men, whatever other faults they may have, no longer live among us like a French colony, or some knot of Propaganda<sup>1</sup> missionaries, but like natural-born subjects of the soil, partaking and sympathizing in all our attachments, humors, and habits. Our literature no longer grows in water, but in mold, and with the true, racy virtues of the soil and climate. How much of this change may be due to Burns, or to any other individual, it might be difficult to estimate. Direct literary imitation of Burns was not to be looked for; but his example in the fearless adoption of domestic subjects could not but operate from afar; and certainly in no heart did the love of country ever burn with a warmer glow than in that of Burns. "A tide of Scottish prejudice," as he modestly calls this deep and generous feeling, had been poured along his veins, and he felt that it would boil there till the flood gates shut in eternal rest. It seemed to him as if he could do so little for his country, and yet would so gladly have done all. One small province stood open for him, that of Scottish song; and how eagerly he entered on it, how devotedly he labored there! In his toilsome journeyings this object never quits him; it is the little Happy Valley<sup>2</sup> of his careworn heart. In the gloom of his own affliction he eagerly searches after some lonely brother of the muse, and rejoices to snatch one other name from the oblivion that was covering it.<sup>3</sup> These were early feelings and they abode with him to the end:

<sup>1</sup> Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, or Society for Propagating the Faith, a Roman Catholic association having charge of missions.

<sup>2</sup> "Happy Valley," i.e., a retreat like the Happy Valley in which Rasselias, Prince of Abyssinia, was said to have been reared, and from which all troubles were excluded (see Johnson's *Rasselias*).

<sup>3</sup> In 1787 Burns erected at his own expense a stone over the grave of the poet Fergusson, in Edinburgh, with the verse:

"No sculptur'd marble here, nor pompous lay,  
No ' storied urn,' nor ' animated bust,'  
This simple stone directs pale Scotia's way  
To pour her sorrows o'er her poet's dust."

" A wish (I mind its power),  
 A wish that to my latest hour  
 Will strongly heave my breast:  
 That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,  
 Some useful plan or book could make,  
 Or sing a sang at least.

" The rough bur Thistle spreading wide  
     Amang<sup>1</sup> the bearded bear,<sup>2</sup>  
     I turn'd my weeding clips<sup>3</sup> aside,  
     And spared the symbol dear."<sup>4</sup>

But, to leave the mere literary character of Burns, which has already detained us too long, far more interesting than any of his written works, as it appears to us, are his acted ones,—the life he willed and was fated to lead among his fellow-men. These poems are but like little rhymed fragments scattered here and there in the grand unrhymed romance of his earthly existence; and it is only when intercalated<sup>5</sup> in this at their proper places that they attain their full measure of significance. And this too, alas, was but a fragment! The plan of a mighty edifice had been sketched; some columns, porticoes, firm masses of building, stand completed; the rest more or less clearly indicated, with many a far-stretching tendency, which only studious and friendly eyes can now trace, toward the purposed termination. For the work is broken off in the middle, almost in the beginning, and rises among us, beautiful and sad, at once unfinished and a ruin! If charitable judgment was necessary in estimating his poems, and justice required that the aim and the manifest power to fulfill it must often be accepted for the fulfillment, much more is this the case in regard to his life, the sum and result of all his endeavors, where his difficulties came upon him, not in detail only, but in mass; and so much has been left unaccomplished,—nay, was mistaken and altogether marred!

Properly speaking, there is but one era in the life of Burns, and

<sup>1</sup> Among.

<sup>2</sup> Barley.

<sup>3</sup> Shears.

<sup>4</sup> The thistle is the Scottish national emblem.

<sup>5</sup> Inserted.

that the earliest. We have not youth and manhood, but only youth; for to the end we discern no decisive change in the complexion of his character; in his thirty-seventh year he is still, as it were, in youth. With all that resoluteness of judgment, that penetrating insight, and singular maturity of intellectual power exhibited in his writings, he never attains to any clearness regarding himself; to the last he never ascertains his peculiar aim, even with such distinctness as is common among ordinary men, and therefore never can pursue it with that singleness of will which insures success and some contentment to such men. To the last he wavers between two purposes. Glorying in his talent like a true poet, he yet cannot consent to make this his chief and sole glory, and to follow it as the one thing needful through poverty or riches, through good or evil report. Another far meaner ambition still cleaves to him: he must dream and struggle about a certain "rock of independence"<sup>1</sup> which, natural and even admirable as it might be, was still but a warring with the world on the comparatively insignificant ground of his being more completely or less completely supplied with money than others; of his standing at a higher or at a lower altitude in general estimation than others. For the world still appears to him, as to the young, in borrowed colors. He expects from it what it cannot give to any man; seeks for contentment not within himself, in action and wise effort, but from without, in the kindness of circumstances, in love, friendship, honor, pecuniary ease. He would be happy not actively and in himself, but passively and from some ideal cornucopia of enjoyments, not earned by his own labor, but showered on him by the beneficence of Destiny. Thus, like a young man, he cannot gird himself up for any worthy, well-calculated goal, but swerves to and fro between passionate hope and remorseful disappointment. Rushing onward with a deep, tempestuous force, he surmounts or breaks asunder many a barrier; travels, nay, advances far, but, advancing only under uncertain guidance, is ever and anon turned from his path, and to the last cannot reach the only true happiness of a

<sup>1</sup> See The Letters of Burns, Nos. XCV. and CXXI.

man,—that of clear, decided activity in the sphere for which by nature and circumstances he has been fitted and appointed.

We do not say these things in dispraise of Burns; nay, perhaps they but interest us the more in his favor. This blessing is not given soonest to the best, but rather it is often the greatest minds that are latest in obtaining it; for where most is to be developed most time may be required to develop it. A complex condition had been assigned him from without, as complex a condition from within. No “*preëstablished harmony*”<sup>1</sup> existed between the clay soil of Mossgiel and the empyrean soul of Robert Burns; it was not wonderful that the adjustment between them should have been long postponed, and his arm long cumbered, and his sight confused in so vast and discordant an economy as he had been appointed steward over. Byron was at his death but a year younger than Burns, and through life, as it might have appeared, far more simply situated; yet in him too we can trace no such adjustment, no such moral manhood, but at best, and only a little before his end, the beginning of what seemed such.

By much the most striking incident in Burns’s life is his journey to Edinburgh; but perhaps a still more important one is his residence at Irvine, so early as in his twenty-third year. Hitherto his life had been poor and toilworn, but otherwise not ungenial, and, with all its distresses, by no means unhappy. In his parentage, deducting outward circumstances, he had every reason to reckon himself fortunate. His father was a man of thoughtful, intense, earnest character, as the best of our peasants are; valuing knowledge, possessing some, and, what is far better and rarer, open-minded for more; a man with a keen insight and devout heart; reverent toward God, friendly, therefore, at once,

<sup>1</sup> By a theory propounded by the German philosopher Leibnitz (1646–1716), perceptions are not the effect of the action of the outside world upon the soul, but arise spontaneously in the soul itself, yet in perfect conformity with the actions of the outside world. The soul and the world resemble two clocks keeping time exactly together, yet not acting one upon another. This theory is the so-called doctrine of a “*preëstablished harmony*.”

and fearless toward all that God has made ; in one word, though but a hard-handed peasant, a complete and fully unfolded man. Such a father is seldom found in any rank in society, and was worth descending far in society to seek. Unfortunately, he was very poor. Had he been even a little richer, almost never so little, the whole might have issued far otherwise. Mighty events turn on a straw ; the crossing of a brook decides the conquest of the world.<sup>1</sup> Had this William Burnes's small seven acres of nursery ground anywise prospered, the boy Robert had been sent to school ; had struggled forward, as so many weaker men do, to some university ; come forth not as a rustic wonder, but as a regular, well-trained, intellectual workman, and changed the whole course of British literature,—for it lay in him to have done this. But the nursery did not prosper ; poverty sank his whole family below the help of even our cheap school system ; Burns remained a hard-worked plowboy, and British literature took its own course. Nevertheless, even in this rugged scene there is much to nourish him. If he drudges it is with his brother and for his father and mother, whom he loves and would fain shield from want. Wisdom is not banished from their poor hearth, nor the balm of natural feeling ; the solemn words, "Let us worship God," are heard there from a "priestlike father;"<sup>2</sup> if threatenings of unjust men throw mother and children into tears,<sup>3</sup> these are tears not of grief only, but of holiest affection ; every heart in that humble group feels itself the closer knit to every other ; in their hard warfare they are there together, a "little band of brethren." Neither are such tears, and the deep beauty that dwells in them, their only portion. Light visits the hearts, as it

<sup>1</sup> The allusion is to Caesar's casting the die for the revolution which made him master of Italy, by crossing the Rubicon, the stream which divided his province of Gaul from Italy, and which the law forbade the proconsul of Gaul to pass.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, stanzas 12–16.

<sup>3</sup> In 1775 Burns's father, his farm proving a bad bargain, fell into the hands of the factor described in *The Twa Dogs*. "The scoundrel factor's insolent, threatening letters," says Burns, "used to set us all in tears."

does the eyes, of all living. There is a force, too, in this youth that enables him to trample on misfortune; nay, to bind it under his feet to make him sport. For a bold, warm, buoyant humor of character has been given him; and so the thick-coming shapes of evil are welcomed with a gay, friendly irony, and in their closest pressure he bates no jot of heart or hope. Vague yearnings of ambition fail not as he grows up; dreamy fancies hang like cloud cities around him; the curtain of existence is slowly rising in many-colored splendor and gloom, and the auroral light of first love is gilding his horizon, and the music of song is on his path. And so he walks

“ In glory and in joy  
Behind his plow, upon the mountain side.”<sup>1</sup>

We ourselves know from the best evidence that up to this date Burns was happy; nay, that he was the gayest, brightest, most fantastic, fascinating being to be found in the world; more so, even, than he ever afterwards appeared. But now at this early age he quits the paternal roof; goes forth into looser, louder, more exciting society; and becomes initiated in those dissipations, those vices, which a certain class of philosophers have asserted to be a natural preparative for entering on active life,—a kind of mud bath in which the youth is, as it were, necessitated to steep and, we suppose, cleanse himself before the real toga of manhood<sup>2</sup> can be laid on him. We shall not dispute much with this class of philosophers; we hope they are mistaken; for sin and remorse so easily beset us at all stages of life, and are always such indifferent company, that it seems hard we should at any stage be forced and fated not only to meet but to yield to them, and even serve for a term in their leprous armada.<sup>3</sup> We hope it

<sup>1</sup> An allusion to Burns in Wordsworth's poem of *Resolution and Independence*.

<sup>2</sup> The toga, the distinctive garment of the Roman citizen, could not be assumed by a youth until he had come of age.

<sup>3</sup> The Spanish term for an armed fleet such as that sent against England in 1588.

is not so. Clear we are, at all events, it cannot be the training one receives in this devil's service, but only our determining to desert from it, that fits us for true, manly action. We become men not after we have been dissipated and disappointed in the chase of false pleasure, but after we have ascertained in any way what impassable barriers hem us in through this life, how mad it is to hope for contentment to our infinite soul from the gifts of this extremely finite world, that a man must be sufficient for himself, and that for suffering and enduring there is no remedy but striving and doing. Manhood begins when we have in any way made truce with necessity; begins even when we have surrendered to necessity, as the most part only do; but begins joyfully and hopefully only when we have reconciled ourselves to necessity, and thus in reality triumphed over it, and felt that in necessity we are free. Surely such lessons as this last, which in one shape or other is the grand lesson for every mortal man, are better learned from the lips of a devout mother, in the looks and actions of a devout father, while the heart is yet soft and pliant, than in collision with the sharp adamant of fate, attracting us to shipwreck us,<sup>1</sup> when the heart is grown hard, and may be broken before it will become contrite. Had Burns continued to learn this as he was already learning it, in his father's cottage, he would have learned it fully,—which he never did,—and been saved many a lasting aberration, many a bitter hour and year of remorseful sorrow.

It seems to us another circumstance of fatal import in Burns's history that at this time, too, he became involved in the religious quarrels of his district; that he was enlisted and feasted as the fighting man of the New Light priesthood in their highly unprofitable warfare. At the tables of these free-minded clergy he learned much more than was needful for him. Such liberal ridicule of fanaticism awakened in his mind scruples about religion

<sup>1</sup> See the story of the Third Calendar in the Arabian Nights, where a mountain of adamant, attracting a ship because of her iron nails, finally draws out the nails, so that the ship sinks at the mountain's foot.

itself, and a whole world of doubts, which it required quite another set of conjurers than these men to exorcise. We do not say that such an intellect as his could have escaped similar doubts at some period of his history, or even that he could at a later period have come through them altogether victorious and unharmed ; but it seems peculiarly unfortunate that this time, above all others, should have been fixed for the encounter. For now, with principles assailed by evil example from without, by " passions raging like demons " from within, he had little need of skeptical misgivings to whisper treason in the heat of the battle, or to cut off his retreat if he were already defeated. He loses his feeling of innocence ; his mind is at variance with itself ; the old divinity no longer presides there, but wild desires and wild repentance alternately oppress him. Ere long, too, he has committed himself before the world ; his character for sobriety, dear to a Scottish peasant as few corrupted worldlings can even conceive, is destroyed in the eyes of men ; and his only refuge consists in trying to disbelieve his guiltiness, and is but a refuge of lies. The blackest desperation now gathers over him, broken only by red lightnings of remorse. The whole fabric of his life is blasted asunder ; for now not only his character, but his personal liberty, is to be lost ; men and fortune are leagued for his hurt ; " hungry Ruin has him in the wind." He sees no escape but the saddest of all,—exile from his loved country to a country in every sense inhospitable and abhorrent to him. While the " gloomy night is gathering fast "<sup>1</sup> in mental storm and solitude, as well as in physical, he sings his wild farewell to Scotland :

" Farewell, my friends ; farewell, my foes !  
My peace with these, my love with those.  
The bursting tears my heart declare ;  
Adieu, my native banks of Ayr!" <sup>2</sup>

Light breaks suddenly in on him in floods, but still a false, transitory light, and no real sunshine. He is invited to Edin-

<sup>1</sup> The first line of The Author's Farewell to his Native Country.

<sup>2</sup> The last lines of the same poem.

burgh ; hastens thither with anticipating heart ; is welcomed as in a triumph and with universal blandishment and acclamation ; whatever is wisest, whatever is greatest or loveliest there, gathers round him to gaze on his face, to show him honor, sympathy, affection. Burns's appearance among the sages and nobles of Edinburgh must be regarded as one of the most singular phenomena in modern literature ; almost like the appearance of some Napoleon among the crowned sovereigns of modern politics. For it is nowise as "a mockery king,"<sup>1</sup> set there by favor, transiently and for a purpose, that he will let himself be treated ; still less is he a mad Rienzi,<sup>2</sup> whose sudden elevation turns his too weak head ; but he stands there on his own basis, cool, unastonished, holding his equal rank from Nature herself, putting forth no claim which there is not strength in him, as well as about him, to vindicate. Mr. Lockhart has some forcible observations on this point :

" It needs no effort of imagination," says he, " to conceive what the sensations of an isolated set of scholars (almost all either clergymen or professors) must have been in the presence of this big-boned, black-browed, brawny stranger, with his great, flashing eyes, who, having forced his way among them from the plowtail at a single stride, manifested in the whole strain of his bearing and conversation a most thorough conviction that in the society of the most eminent men of his nation he was exactly where he was entitled to be ; hardly deigned to flatter them by exhibiting even an occasional symptom of being flattered by their notice ; by turns calmly measured himself against the most cultivated understandings of his time in discussion ; overpowered the bonmots<sup>3</sup> of the most celebrated convivialists by broad floods of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. " Oh that I were a mockery king of snow!" —SHAKESPEARE'S *Richard II.*, act iv. sc. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cola di Rienzi (1312–54), a Roman peasant scholar who, to reform the abuses growing out of the absence of the Pope at Avignon, made himself dictator under the title of " Tribune ;" but, becoming arrogant and capricious, he soon provoked the people to rebel, and they finally killed him.

<sup>3</sup> Witty sayings.

merriment, impregnated with all the burning life of genius; astounded bosoms habitually enveloped in the thrice-piled<sup>1</sup> folds of social reserve, by compelling them to tremble—nay, to tremble visibly—beneath the fearless touch of natural pathos; and all this without indicating the smallest willingness to be ranked among those professional ministers of excitement who are content to be paid in money and smiles for doing what the spectators and auditors would be ashamed of doing in their own persons, even if they had the power of doing it; and last, and probably worst of all, who was known to be in the habit of enlivening societies which they would have scorned to approach still more frequently than their own, with eloquence no less magnificent, with wit in all likelihood still more daring,—often enough,—as the superiors whom he fronted without alarm might have guessed from the beginning, and had ere long no occasion to guess,—with wit pointed at themselves."

The farther we remove from this scene, the more singular will it seem to us; details of the exterior aspect of it are already full of interest. Most readers recollect Mr. Walker's personal interviews with Burns as among the best passages of his "Narrative." A time will come when this reminiscence of Sir Walter Scott's, slight though it is, will also be precious:

"As for Burns," writes Sir Walter,<sup>2</sup> "I may truly say, 'Virgilium vidi tantum.'<sup>3</sup> I was a lad of fifteen in 1786–87, when he came first to Edinburgh, but had sense and feeling enough to be much interested in his poetry, and would have given the world to know him; but I had very little acquaintance with any literary people, and still less with the gentry of the west country, the two sets that he most frequented. Mr. Thomas Grierson was at that time a clerk of my father's. He knew Burns, and promised

<sup>1</sup> The richness of velvets was formerly determined by the nap or pile, so that "thrice-piled" indicates a superior quality.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Lockhart, afterwards included in the latter's Life of Scott, chap. v.

<sup>3</sup> "Virgil I merely saw" (quoted from the *Tristia* of the Latin poet Ovid).

to ask him to his lodgings to dinner, but had no opportunity to keep his word; otherwise I might have seen more of this distinguished man. As it was, I saw him one day at the late venerable Professor Ferguson's,<sup>1</sup> where there were several gentlemen of literary reputation, among whom I remember the celebrated Mr. Dugald Stewart.<sup>2</sup> Of course we youngsters sat silent, looked, and listened. The only thing I remember which was remarkable in Burns's manner was the effect produced upon him by a print of Bunbury's,<sup>3</sup> representing a soldier lying dead on the snow, his dog sitting in misery on one side, on the other his widow with a child in her arms. These lines were written beneath:

“ ‘ Cold on Canadian <sup>4</sup> hills, or Minden’s <sup>5</sup> plain,  
 Perhaps that mother wept her soldier slain ;  
 Bent o’er her babe, her eye dissolved in dew,  
 The big drops mingling with the milk he drew  
 Gave the sad presage of his future years,  
 The child of misery baptized in tears.’

“ Burns seemed much affected by the print, or rather by the ideas which it suggested to his mind. He actually shed tears. He asked whose the lines were; and it chanced that nobody but myself remembered that they occur in a half-forgotten poem of Langhorne’s,<sup>6</sup> called by the unpromising title of ‘The Justice of Peace.’ I whispered my information to a friend present; he mentioned it to Burns, who rewarded me with a look and a word

<sup>1</sup> Adam Ferguson (1724–1816), Scotch minister and philosopher.

<sup>2</sup> See Note 2, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> An English amateur artist and caricaturist (1750–1811).

<sup>4</sup> During the Seven Years’ War, hostilities between the French and the English were carried into their American colonies, resulting, in 1760, in the cession of Canada to the English.

<sup>5</sup> A town on the Weser in Prussia, where, during the Seven Years’ War, the English and Prussians defeated the French in 1759.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. John Langhorne (1735–79), poet, and translator of Plutarch’s Lives. His poems are deservedly forgotten, with the exception of this Appeal to Country Justices, in which rural English life is painted with accuracy and pathos.

which, though of mere civility, I then received, and still recollect, with very great pleasure.

" His person was strong and robust ; his manners rustic, not clownish, a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity, which received part of its effect, perhaps, from one's knowledge of his extraordinary talents. His features are represented in Mr. Nasmyth's picture,<sup>1</sup> but to me it conveys the idea that they are diminished, as if seen in perspective. I think his countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits. I should have taken the poet, had I not known what he was, for a very sagacious country farmer of the old Scotch school ; i.e., none of your modern agriculturalists who keep laborers for their drudgery, but the *douce gudeman*<sup>2</sup> who held his own plow. There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments ; the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large and of a dark cast, which glowed (I say literally *glowed*) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time. His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption. Among the men who were the most learned of their time and country he expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive forwardness ; and when he differed in opinion he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty. I do not remember any part of his conversation distinctly enough to be quoted ; nor did I ever see him again, except in the street, where he did not recognize me, as I could not expect he should. He was much caressed in Edinburgh, but (considering what literary emoluments have been since his day<sup>3</sup>) the efforts made for his relief were extremely trifling.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Nasmyth (1758–1840), a Scotch landscape painter of no great merit, who drew, in 1787, the only authentic portrait of Burns for the volume of his poems.

<sup>2</sup> Sober goodman, or husband.

<sup>3</sup> Scott himself had just sold Woodstock for over eight thousand pounds.

"I remember, on this occasion I mention, I thought Burns's acquaintance with English poetry was rather limited; and also that, having twenty times the abilities of Allan Ramsay and of Fergusson, he talked of them with too much humility as his models. There was doubtless national predilection in his estimate.

"This is all I can tell you about Burns. I have only to add that his dress corresponded with his manner. He was like a farmer dressed in his best to dine with the laird. I do not speak *in malam partem*<sup>1</sup> when I say I never saw a man in company with his superiors in station or information more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment. I was told, but did not observe it, that his address to females was extremely deferential, and always with a turn either to the pathetic or humorous, which engaged their attention particularly. I have heard the late Duchess of Gordon<sup>2</sup> remark this. I do not know anything I can add to these recollections of forty years since."

53 The conduct of Burns under this dazzling blaze of favor, the calm, unaffected, manly manner in which he not only bore it, but estimated its value, has justly been regarded as the best proof that could be given of his real vigor and integrity of mind. A little natural vanity, some touches of hypocritical modesty, some glimmerings of affectation, at least some fear of being thought affected, we could have pardoned in almost any man; but no such indication is to be traced here. In his unexampled situation the young peasant is not a moment perplexed; so many strange lights do not confuse him, do not lead him astray. Nevertheless we cannot but perceive that this winter did him great and lasting injury. A somewhat clearer knowledge of men's affairs—scarcely of their characters—it did afford him; but a sharper feeling of Fortune's unequal arrangements in their social destiny it also left with him.

<sup>1</sup> With a bad grace.

<sup>2</sup> Jane, wife of the fourth Duke of Gordon (1749–1812), famous for her beauty and wit, and arbitress of Edinburgh fashion at this time. She remarked that Burns was the only man who had ever carried her off her feet.

He had seen the gay and gorgeous arena in which the powerful are born to play their parts, nay, had himself stood in the midst of it; and he felt more bitterly than ever that here he was but a looker-on and had no part or lot in that splendid game. From this time a jealous, indignant fear of social degradation takes possession of him, and perverts, so far as aught could pervert, his private contentment and his feelings toward his richer fellows. It was clear to Burns that he had talent enough to make a fortune, or a hundred fortunes, could he but have rightly willed this; it was clear also that he willed something far different and therefore could not make one. Unhappy it was that he had not power to choose the one and reject the other, but must halt forever between two opinions, two objects, making hampered advancement toward either. But so is it with many men: we "long for the merchandise, yet would fain keep the price;" and so stand chaffering with Fate in vexatious altercation till the night come and our fair is over!

The Edinburgh learned of that period were in general more noted for clearness of head than for warmth of heart. With the exception of the good old Blacklock,<sup>1</sup> whose help was too ineffectual, scarcely one among them seems to have looked at Burns with any true sympathy, or, indeed, much otherwise than as a highly curious *thing*. By the great, also, he is treated in the customary fashion, entertained at their tables, and dismissed. Certain modica<sup>2</sup> of pudding and praise are, from time to time, gladly exchanged for the fascination of his presence, which exchange once effected, the bargain is finished and each party goes his several way. At the end of this strange season Burns gloomily sums up his gains and losses and meditates on the chaotic future. In money he is somewhat richer; in fame and the show of happiness

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Thomas Blacklock (1721-91), a blind Scotch poet, whose verse, chiefly descriptive, shows a remarkable familiarity with visible nature, but has little originality. It was a letter from Blacklock that took Burns to Edinburgh instead of to Jamaica.

<sup>2</sup> Plural of the Latin *modicum* ("a morsel").

infinitely richer ; but in the substance of it as poor as ever,—nay, poorer ; for his heart is now maddened still more with the fever of worldly ambition, and through long years the disease will rack him with unprofitable sufferings, and weaken his strength for all true and noble aims.

What Burns was next to do or to avoid, how a man so circumstanced was now to guide himself toward his true advantage, might at this point of time have been a question for the wisest. It was a question, too, which, apparently, he was left altogether to answer for himself ; of his learned or rich patrons it had not struck any individual to turn a thought on this so trivial matter. Without claiming for Burns the praise of perfect sagacity, we must say that his excise and farm scheme does not seem to us a very unreasonable one ; that we should be at a loss even now to suggest one decidedly better. Certain of his admirers have felt scandalized at his ever resolving to gauge, and would have had him lie at the pool till the spirit of patronage stirred the waters, that so, with one friendly plunge, all his sorrows might be healed.<sup>1</sup> Unwise counselors ! They know not the manner of this spirit, and how, in the lap of most golden dreams, a man might have happiness, were it not that in the interim he must die of hunger ! It reflects credit on the manliness and sound sense of Burns that he felt so early on what ground he was standing, and preferred self-help on the humblest scale to dependence and inaction, though with hope of far more splendid possibilities. But even these possibilities were not rejected in his scheme ; he might expect, if it chanced that he had any friend, to rise in no long period into something even like opulence and leisure ; while, again, if it chanced that he had no friend, he could still live in security ; and for the rest, he " did not intend to borrow honor from any profession." We reckon that his plan was honest and well calculated ; all turned on the execution of it. Doubtless it failed ; yet not, we believe, from any vice inherent in itself. Nay, after all, it was no failure of external means, but of internal, that overtook Burns.

<sup>1</sup> See John v. 2-9.

His was no bankruptcy of the purse, but of the soul; to his last day he owed no man anything.

Meanwhile he begins well with two good and wise actions. His donation to his mother, munificent from a man whose income had lately been seven pounds a year, was worthy of him, and not more than worthy. Generous also, and worthy of him, was the treatment of the woman whose life's welfare now depended on his pleasure. A friendly observer might have hoped serene days for him; his mind is on the true road to peace with itself; what clearness he still wants will be given as he proceeds, for the best teacher of duties that still lie dim to us is the practice of those we see and have at hand. Had the "patrons of genius," who could give him nothing, but taken nothing from him,—at least, nothing more!—the wounds of his heart would have healed, vulgar ambition would have died away. Toil and Frugality would have been welcome, since Virtue dwelt with them; and Poetry would have shone through them as of old; and in her clear, ethereal light, which was his own by birthright, he might have looked down on his earthly destiny and all its obstructions, not with patience only, but with love.

But the patrons of genius would not have it so. Picturesque tourists, all manner of fashionable danglers after literature, and, far worse, all manner of convivial Mæcenases<sup>1</sup> hovered round him in his retreat, and his good as well as his weak qualities secured them influence over him. He was flattered by their notice, and his warm, social nature made it impossible for him to shake them off and hold on his way apart from them. These men, as we believe, were proximately the means of his ruin. Not that they meant him any ill; they only meant themselves a little good; if he suffered harm let him look to it! But they wasted his precious time and his precious talent; they disturbed his composure, broke down his returning habits of temperance and assiduous, contented exertion. Their pampering was baneful to him; their cruelty,

<sup>1</sup> Mæcenas, who lived in the Augustan Age of Rome, was a somewhat epicurean patron of literature and art; hence, any patronizer of poets or artists.

which soon followed, was equally baneful. The old grudge against fortune's inequality awoke with new bitterness in their neighborhood, and Burns had no retreat but to "the rock of independence," which is but an air castle, after all, that looks well at a distance, but will screen no one from real wind and wet.Flushed with irregular excitement, exasperated alternately by contempt of others and contempt of himself, Burns was no longer regaining his peace of mind, but fast losing it forever. There was a hollowness at the heart of his life, for his conscience did not now approve what he was doing.

Amid the vapors of unwise enjoyment, of bootless remorse and angry discontent with fate, his true loadstar,—a life of poetry, with poverty, nay, with famine if it must be so,—was too often altogether hidden from his eyes. And yet he sailed a sea where without some such loadstar there was no right steering. Meteors of French politics rose before him, but these were not his stars. An accident this, which hastened, but did not originate, his worst distresses. In the mad contentions of that time he comes in collision with certain official superiors,<sup>1</sup> is wounded by them,—cruelly lacerated, we should say, could a dead, mechanical implement in any case be called cruel,—and shrinks, in indignant pain, into deeper self-seclusion, into gloomier moodiness, than ever. His life has now lost its unity; it is a life of fragments, led with little aim,—beyond the melancholy one of securing its own continuance,—in fits of wild, false joy when such offered, and of black despondency when they passed away. His character before the world begins to suffer; calumny is busy with him; for a miserable man makes more enemies than friends. Some faults he has fallen into, and a thousand misfortunes; but deep criminality is what he stands accused of, and they that are not without sin cast the first

<sup>1</sup> Having behaved with gallantry at the seizing of a smuggling vessel in 1792, Burns bought four small guns at the sale of her equipments, and sent them, with a letter, to the French Convention. They were retained by the customhouse authorities, and an inquiry into the poet's political conduct was ordered by the Board of Excise.

stone at him! For is he not a wellwisher to the French Revolution, a Jacobin,<sup>1</sup> and, therefore, in that one act guilty of all? These accusations, political and moral, it has since appeared, were false enough; but the world hesitated little to credit them. Nay, his convivial Mæcenases themselves were not the last to do it. There is reason to believe that in his later years the Dumfries aristocracy had partly withdrawn themselves from Burns, as from a tainted person no longer worthy of their acquaintance. That painful class stationed in all provincial cities behind the outmost breastwork of gentility, there to stand siege and do battle against the intrusions of grocerdom and grazierdom, had actually seen dishonor in the society of Burns and branded him with their veto;<sup>2</sup> had, as we vulgarly say, cut him! We find one passage in this work of Mr. Lockhart's which will not out of our thoughts:

"A gentleman of that county, whose name I have already more than once had occasion to refer to, has often told me that he was seldom more grieved than when, riding into Dumfries one fine summer evening about this time to attend a county ball, he saw Burns walking alone on the shady side of the principal street of the town, while the opposite side was gay with successive groups of gentlemen and ladies, all drawn together for the festivities of the night, not one of whom appeared willing to recognize him. The horseman dismounted and joined Burns, who, on his proposing to cross the street, said: 'Nay, nay, my young friend; that's all over now;' and quoted, after a pause, some verses of Lady Grizel Baillie's<sup>3</sup> pathetic ballad:

<sup>1</sup> A sympathizer with the French faction which took a leading part in the violent measures of the Revolution, called Jacobins from their place of meeting, a monastery of the Dominican monks of St. Jacques (James). The feeling against the French Revolutionists was very strong at this time in England.

<sup>2</sup> Literally (in Latin), "I forbid;" hence a negative, or a denial of recognition.

<sup>3</sup> A noble Scottish lady (1665–1746), some of whose poems appeared in Ramsay's Tea-Table Miscellany. This ballad has a lasting place in Scottish literature.

“ His bonnet<sup>1</sup> stood ance<sup>2</sup> fu’<sup>3</sup> fair on his brow,  
 His auld ane look’d better than mony ane’s new;  
 But now he lets ’t wear ony way it will hing,<sup>4</sup>  
 And casts himsell dowie<sup>5</sup> upon the cornbing.<sup>6</sup>

“ Oh, were we young as we ance hae been,  
 We sud<sup>7</sup> hae been galloping down on yon green,  
 And linking<sup>8</sup> it ower the lily-white lea!  
*And werena<sup>9</sup> my heart light, I wad<sup>10</sup> die.’*

It was little in Burns’s character to let his feelings on certain subjects escape in this fashion. He immediately after reciting these verses assumed the sprightliness of his most pleasing manner, and, taking his young friend home with him, entertained him very agreeably till the hour of the ball arrived.”

Alas! when we think that Burns now sleeps “ where bitter indignation can no longer lacerate his heart,”<sup>11</sup> and that most of those fair dames and frizzled gentlemen already lie at his side, where the breastwork of gentility is quite thrown down, who would not sigh over the thin delusions and foolish toys that divide heart from heart and make man unmerciful to his brother?

It was not now to be hoped that the genius of Burns would ever reach maturity or accomplish aught worthy of itself. His spirit was jarred in its melody; not the soft breath of natural feeling, but the rude hand of Fate, was now sweeping over the strings. And yet what harmony was in him, what music even in his discords! How the wild tones had a charm for the simplest and the wisest, and all men felt and knew that here also was one of the gifted! “ If he entered an inn at midnight, after all the inmates were in bed, the news of his arrival circulated from the cellar to the garret, and ere ten minutes had elapsed the landlord and all his guests were assembled!”

<sup>1</sup> Cap.

<sup>2</sup> Once.

<sup>3</sup> Full.

<sup>4</sup> Hang.

<sup>5</sup> In low spirits.

<sup>6</sup> Heap of corn.

<sup>7</sup> Should.

<sup>8</sup> Tripping.

<sup>9</sup> Were not.

<sup>10</sup> Would.

<sup>11</sup> *Ubi sæva indignatio cor. ulterius lacerare nequit.* From Swift’s epitaph; composed by himself.

Some brief, pure moments of poetic life were yet appointed him in the composition of his songs. We can understand how he grasped at this employment, and how, too, he spurned all other reward for it but what the labor itself brought him.<sup>1</sup> For the soul of Burns, though scathed and marred, was yet living in its full moral strength, though sharply conscious of its errors and abasement; and here, in his destitution and degradation, was one act of seeming nobleness and self-devotedness left even for him to perform. He felt, too, that, with all the "thoughtless follies" that had "laid him low," the world was unjust and cruel to him; and he silently appealed to another and calmer time. Not as a hired soldier, but as a patriot, would he strive for the glory of his country; so he cast from him the poor sixpence a day and served zealously as a volunteer. Let us not grudge him this last luxury of his existence; let him not have appealed to us in vain! The money was not necessary to him; he struggled through without it. Long since, these guineas would have been gone, and now the high-mindedness of refusing them will plead for him in all hearts forever.

We are here arrived at the crisis of Burns's life, for matters had now taken such a shape with him as could not long continue. If improvement was not to be looked for, nature could only for a limited time maintain this dark and maddening warfare against the world and itself. We are not medically informed whether any continuance of years was at this period probable for Burns; whether his death is to be looked on as in some sense an accidental event, or only as the natural consequence of the long series of events that had preceded. The latter seems to be the likelier opinion, and yet it is by no means a certain one. At all

<sup>1</sup> The greater number of Burns's songs were freely contributed to two collections of Scottish Airs, in which he took an active and patriotic interest. The publisher of one, Johnson's Musical Museum, he called "a patriot for the music of his country;" while to the projector of the second he wrote: "As to any remuneration, you may think my songs either above or below price, for they shall absolutely be one or the other."

events, as we have said, some change could not be very distant. Three gates of deliverance, it seems to us, were open for Burns,—clear poetical activity, madness, or death. The first, with longer life, was still possible, though not probable, for physical causes were beginning to be concerned in it; and yet Burns had an iron resolution, could he have but seen and felt that not only his highest glory, but his first duty and the true medicine for all his woes, lay here. The second was still less probable, for his mind was ever among the clearest and firmest. So the milder third gate was opened for him; and he passed, not softly, yet speedily, into that still country where the hailstorms and fire showers do not reach, and the heaviest laden wayfarer at length lays down his load.

Contemplating this sad end of Burns, and how he sank unaided by any real help, uncheered by any wise sympathy, generous minds have sometimes figured to themselves, with a reproachful sorrow, that much might have been done for him; that by counsel, true affection, and friendly ministrations, he might have been saved to himself and the world. We question whether there is not more tenderness of heart than soundness of judgment in these suggestions. It seems dubious to us whether the richest, wisest, most benevolent individual could have lent Burns any effectual help. Counsel, which seldom profits any one, he did not need; in his understanding he knew the right from the wrong as well, perhaps, as any man ever did; but the persuasion which would have availed him lies not so much in the head as in the heart, where no argument or expostulation could have assisted much to implant it. As to money, again, we do not believe that this was his essential want, or well see how any private man could, even presupposing Burns's consent, have bestowed on him an independent fortune with much prospect of decisive advantage. It is a mortifying truth that two men in any rank of society could hardly be found virtuous enough to give money, and to take it as a necessary gift, without injury to the moral entireness of one or both. But so

stands the fact. Friendship, in the old heroic sense of that term, no longer exists ; except in the cases of kindred or other legal affinity, it is in reality no longer expected, or recognized as a virtue among men. A close observer of manners has pronounced "patronage"—that is, pecuniary or other economic furtherance—to be "twice cursed," cursing him that gives and him that takes. And thus in regard to outward matters also it has become the rule, as in regard to inward it always was and must be the rule, that no one shall look for effectual help to another, but that each shall rest contented with what help he can afford himself. Such, we say, is the principle of modern honor, naturally enough growing out of that sentiment of pride which we inculcate and encourage as the basis of our whole social morality. Many a poet has been poorer than Burns, but no one was ever prouder. We may question whether, without great precautions, even a pension from royalty would not have galled and encumbered more than actually assisted him.

Still less, therefore, are we disposed to join with another class of Burns's admirers, who accuse the higher ranks among us of having ruined Burns by their selfish neglect of him. We have already stated our doubts whether direct pecuniary help, had it been offered, would have been accepted or could have proved very effectual. We shall readily admit, however, that much was to be done for Burns ; that many a poisoned arrow might have been warded from his bosom, many an entanglement in his path cut asunder by the hand of the powerful ; and light and heat shed on him from high places would have made his humble atmosphere more genial ; and the softest heart then breathing might have lived and died with some fewer pangs. Nay, we shall grant further—and for Burns it is granting much—that, with all his pride, he would have thanked, even with exaggerated gratitude, any one who had cordially befriended him. Patronage, unless once cursed, needed not to have been twice so. At all events, the poor promotion he desired in his calling might have been granted. It was his own scheme, therefore likelier than any other to be of service.

All this it might have been a luxury—nay, it was a duty—for our nobility to have done. No part of all this, however, did any of them do, or apparently attempt or wish to do; so much is granted against them. But what, then, is the amount of their blame? Simply that they were men of the world and walked by the principles of such men,—that they treated Burns as other nobles and other commoners had done other poets; as the English did Shakespeare;<sup>1</sup> as King Charles<sup>2</sup> and his Cavaliers did Butler; as King Philip<sup>3</sup> and his grandees<sup>4</sup> did Cervantes.<sup>5</sup> Do men gather grapes of thorns, or shall we cut down our thorns for yielding only a fence and haws? How, indeed, could the “nobility and gentry of his native land” hold out any help to this “Scottish bard, proud of his name and country”? Were the nobility and gentry so much as able rightly to help themselves? Had they not their game to preserve, their borough interests to strengthen? dinners, therefore, of various kinds to eat and give? Were their means more than adequate to all this business, or less than adequate? Less than adequate, in general. Few of them in reality were richer than Burns; many of them were poorer; for sometimes they had to wring their supplies as with thumbscrews from the hard hand, and in their need of guineas to forget their duty of mercy, which Burns was never reduced to do. Let us pity and forgive them. The game they preserved and shot, the dinners they ate and gave, the borough interests they strengthened, the little Babylons<sup>6</sup> they severally builded by the glory of their

<sup>1</sup> See Sonnet XXV. :

“ Let those who are in favor with their stars  
 Of public honor and proud titles boast,  
 Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumphs bars,  
 Unlook’d for, joy in that I honor most.”

<sup>2</sup> Charles II. (see Note 1, p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> Philip II. of Spain.

<sup>4</sup> “ Grandee” is the general term for a Spanish noble.

<sup>5</sup> Miguel Saavedra de Cervantes (1547–1616), a Spanish author, whose fame rests on his *Don Quixote*. He lived and died in poverty, and was several times in prison.

<sup>6</sup> Or Babels. Pet hobbies or enterprises (see Gen. xi. 4–9).

might, are all melted or melting back into the primeval chaos, as man's merely selfish endeavors are fated to do. And here was an action extending, in virtue of its worldly influence, we may say, through all time; in virtue of its moral nature, beyond all time, being immortal as the spirit of goodness itself; this action was offered them to do, and light was not given them to do it. Let us pity and forgive them. But, better than pity, let us go and do otherwise. Human suffering did not end with the life of Burns; neither was the solemn mandate, "Love one another," "Bear one another's burdens,"<sup>1</sup> given to the rich only, but to all men. True, we shall find no Burns to relieve, to assuage by our aid or our pity; but celestial natures groaning under the fardels<sup>2</sup> of a weary life we shall still find; and that wretchedness which fate has rendered voiceless and tuneless is not the least wretched, but the most. ↗ Still, we do not think that the blame of Burns's failure lies chiefly with the world. The world, it seems to us, treated him with more, rather than with less, kindness than it usually shows to such men. It has ever, we fear, shown but small favor to its teachers; hunger and nakedness, perils and revilings, the prison, the cross, the poison chalice, have, in most times and countries, been the market price it has offered for wisdom, the welcome with which it has greeted those who have come to enlighten and purify it. Homer<sup>3</sup> and Socrates<sup>4</sup> and the Christian apostles belong to old days, but the world's martyrology was not completed with these. Roger Bacon<sup>5</sup> and Galileo<sup>6</sup> languish in priestly dungeons;

<sup>1</sup> See John xv. 12, and Gal. vi. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Burdens (see Hamlet, act iii. sc. 1).

<sup>3</sup> The old rhymed tradition reads:

" Seven cities fought for Homer dead,  
Through which the living Homer begged his bread."

<sup>4</sup> Socrates, for instructing the youth of Athens in a new form of philosophy, was put to death by poisoning, on a charge of unbelief and evil influence.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Bacon (1214 (?)–94), an English monk and philosopher far in advance of his age, whose writings were condemned by a council of monks, and who was thereupon thrown into prison for ten years.

<sup>6</sup> Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), the great Italian astronomer and inventor

Tasso<sup>1</sup> pines in the cell of a madhouse ; Camoëns<sup>2</sup> dies begging on the streets of Lisbon. So neglected, "so persecuted they the prophets,"<sup>3</sup> not in Judæa only, but in all places where men have been. We reckon that every poet of Burns's order is, or should be, a prophet and teacher to his age ; that he has no right to expect great kindness from it, but rather is bound to do it great kindness ; that Burns in particular experienced fully the usual proportion of the world's goodness ; and that the blame of his failure, as we have said, lies not chiefly with the world.

Where, then, does it lie ? We are forced to answer, "With himself ; it is his inward, not his outward, misfortunes that bring him to the dust." Seldom, indeed, is it otherwise ; seldom is a life morally wrecked but the grand cause lies in some internal malarrangement, some want, less of good fortune than of good guidance. Nature fashions no creature without implanting in it the strength needful for its action and duration ; least of all does she so neglect her masterpiece and darling, the poetic soul. Neither can we believe that it is in the power of any external circumstances utterly to ruin the mind of a man,—nay, if proper wisdom be given him, even so much as to affect its essential health and beauty. The sternest sum total of all worldly misfortunes is death ; nothing more can lie in the cup of human woe ; yet many men in all ages have triumphed over death, and led it captive, converting its physical victory into a moral victory for themselves, into a seal and immortal consecration for all that their past life had achieved. What has been done may be done again ;

of the telescope, who, for demonstrating the truth of the Copernican system of the earth's motion, was forced by the papal government to do public penance in his seventieth year, and was for some time imprisoned.

<sup>1</sup> Torquato Tasso (1544–95), a graceful Italian poet, best known for his great epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Freed*). He lived for some time with the Duke of Ferrara, but for some mysterious reason was imprisoned by the Duke for seven years.

<sup>2</sup> Luis Camoëns (1524–79), a celebrated Portuguese poet, author of the patriotic epic, *The Lusiad*. His last years were passed in great poverty.

<sup>3</sup> See Matt. v. 12.

nay, it is but the degree, and not the kind, of such heroism that differs in different seasons ; for without some portion of this spirit, not of boisterous daring, but of silent fearlessness, of self-denial in all its forms, no good man, in any scene or time, has ever attained to be good.

We have already stated the error of Burns, and mourned over it rather than blamed it. It was the want of unity in his purposes, of consistency in his aims, the hapless attempt to mingle in friendly union the common spirit of the world with the spirit of poetry, which is of a far different and altogether irreconcilable nature. Burns was nothing wholly, and Burns could be nothing—no man formed as he was can be anything—by halves. The heart, not of a mere hot-blooded, popular versemonger, or poetical *restaurateur*,<sup>1</sup> but of a true poet and singer worthy of the old religious, heroic times, had been given him ; and he fell in an age, not of heroism and religion, but of skepticism, selfishness, and triviality, when true nobleness was little understood, and its place supplied by a hollow, dissocial, altogether barren and unfruitful principle of pride. The influences of that age, his open, kind, susceptible nature, to say nothing of his highly untoward situation, made it more than usually difficult for him to cast aside or rightly subordinate ; the better spirit that was within him ever sternly demanded its rights, its supremacy. He spent his life in endeavoring to reconcile these two, and lost it, as he must lose it, without reconciling them.

Burns was born poor, and born also to continue poor, for he would not endeavor to be otherwise. This it had been well could he have once for all admitted, and considered as finally settled. He was poor, truly, but hundreds even of his own class and order of minds have been poorer, yet have suffered nothing deadly from it. Nay, his own father had a far sorcer battle with ungrateful destiny than his was ; and he did not yield to it, but died courageously warring, and to all moral intents prevailing,

<sup>1</sup> Literally, the keeper of an eating house ; a mere purveyor of refreshment or amusement.

against it. True, Burns had little means, had even little time for poetry, his only real pursuit and vocation ; but so much the more precious was what little he had. In all these external respects his case was hard, but very far from the hardest. Poverty, incessant drudgery, and much worse evils it has often been the lot of poets and wise men to strive with, and their glory to conquer. Locke was banished as a traitor, and wrote his "Essay on the Human Understanding" sheltering himself in a Dutch garret.<sup>1</sup> Was Milton rich or at his ease when he composed "Paradise Lost?"<sup>2</sup> Not only low, but fallen from a height ; not only poor, but impoverished ; in darkness and with dangers compassed round, he sang his immortal song, and found fit audience, though few. Did not Cervantes finish his work a maimed soldier and in prison ? Nay, was not the "Araucana,"<sup>3</sup> which Spain acknowledges as its epic, written, without even the aid of paper, on scraps of leather, as the stout fighter and voyager snatched any moment from that wild warfare?

And what, then, had these men which Burns wanted ? Two things, both which, it seems to us, are indispensable for such men. They had a true, religious principle of morals, and a single, not a double, aim in their activity. They were not self-seekers and self-worshipers, but seekers and worshipers of something far better than self. Not personal enjoyment was their object, but a high, heroic idea of religion, of patriotism, of heavenly wisdom, in one or the other form, ever hovered before them ; in which cause they neither shrank from suffering nor called on the earth to witness it as something wonderful, but patiently endured, counting it

<sup>1</sup> John Locke (1632–1704), the great English philosopher, followed the fortunes of the Earl of Shaftesbury, and retired with him into exile in Holland in 1682.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradise Lost* was written not only after Milton's blindness and loss of fortune, but when the Restoration had rendered his position as precarious as it had been distinguished under the Commonwealth.

<sup>3</sup> An account of an expedition against the Araucanians in South America, held to be the best heroic poem in the Spanish language, and said to have been written in the wilderness by Alonzo de Ercilla (1533–95).

blessedness enough so to spend and be spent. Thus the “golden calf of self-love,”<sup>1</sup> however curiously carved, was not their deity, but the invisible Goodness which alone is man’s reasonable service. This feeling was as a celestial fountain whose streams refreshed into gladness and beauty all the provinces of their otherwise too desolate existence. In a word, they willed one thing, to which all other things were subordinated and made subservient, and therefore they accomplished it. The wedge will rend rocks, but its edge must be sharp and single; if it be double, the wedge is bruised in pieces and will rend nothing.

Part of this superiority these men owed to their age, in which heroism and devotedness were still practiced, or at least not yet disbelieved in; but much of it likewise they owed to themselves. With Burns, again, it was different. His morality in most of its practical points is that of a mere worldly man; enjoyment in a finer or coarser shape is the only thing he longs and strives for. A noble instinct sometimes raises him above this, but an instinct only, and acting only for moments. He has no religion; in the shallow age where his days were cast, religion was not discriminated from the New and Old Light forms of religion, and was with these becoming obsolete in the minds of men. His heart, indeed, is alive with a trembling adoration, but there is no temple in his understanding. He lives in darkness and in the shadow of doubt. His religion at best is an anxious wish; like that of Rabelais,<sup>2</sup> “a great perhaps.”

He loved poetry warmly and in his heart; could he but have loved it purely and with his whole, undivided heart, it had been well. For poetry as Burns could have followed it is but another form of wisdom, of religion; is itself wisdom and religion. But

<sup>1</sup> See Exod. xxxii., where the Jews made an idol in the form of a golden calf, and “fashioned it with a graving tool.”

<sup>2</sup> François Rabelais (1495–1553), a French scholar, physician, and philosopher, yet fitly called by Lord Bacon “the great jester of France.” He took vows as a monk, but soon threw them off and directed the coarse and vigorous satire of his *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* chiefly against the religious orders.

this also was denied him. His poetry is a stray, vagrant gleam, which will not be extinguished within him, yet rises not to be the true light of his path, but is often a wildfire that misleads him. It was not necessary for Burns to be rich, to be or to seem "independent;" but it was necessary for him to be at one with his own heart; to place what was highest in his nature highest also in his life; "to seek within himself for that consistency and sequence which external events would forever refuse him." He was born a poet; poetry was the celestial element of his being, and should have been the soul of his whole endeavors. Lifted into that serene ether whither he had wings given him to mount, he would have needed no other elevation. Poverty, neglect, and all evil, save the desecration of himself and his art, were a small matter to him; the pride and the passions of the world lay far beneath his feet; and he looked down alike on noble and slave, on prince and beggar, and all that wore the stamp of man, with clear recognition, with brotherly affection, with sympathy, with pity. Nay, we question whether, for his culture as a poet, poverty and much suffering for a season were not absolutely advantageous. Great men, in looking back over their lives, have testified to that effect. "I would not for much," says Jean Paul,<sup>1</sup> "that I had been born richer." And yet Paul's birth was poor enough, for in another place he adds: "The prisoner's allowance is bread and water, and I had often only the latter." But the gold that is refined in the hottest furnace comes out the purest; or, as he has himself expressed it, "the canary bird sings sweeter the longer it has been trained in a darkened cage."

A man like Burns might have divided his hours between poetry

<sup>1</sup> Jean Paul Friedrich Richter (1763-1825), a German humorist, novelist, and philosopher, who clothed much wisdom and poetic inspiration in a style which, according to Carlyle, is "fantastic, many-colored, far-grasping, every way perplexed and extraordinary." The two novels, *Hesperus* and *Titan*, Carlyle calls the largest and best of his works of fiction, while his *Introduction to Æsthetics*, and *Levana*,—a treatise on education,—are the most important of his serious works.

and virtuous industry ; industry which all true feeling sanctions, nay, prescribes, and which has a beauty for that cause beyond the pomp of thrones ; but to divide his hours between poetry and rich men's banquets was an ill-starred and inauspicious attempt. How could he be at ease at such banquets ? What had he to do there, mingling his music with the coarse roar of altogether earthly voices, brightening the thick smoke of intoxication with fire lent him from heaven ? Was it his aim to enjoy life ? To-morrow he must go drudge as an exciseman ! We wonder not that Burns became moody, indignant, and at times an offender against certain rules of society, but rather that he did not grow utterly frantic and run amuck against them all. How could a man so falsely placed, by his own or others' fault, ever know contentment or peaceable diligence for an hour ? What he did under such perverse guidance, and what he forbore to do, alike fill us with astonishment at the natural strength and worth of his character.

Doubtless there was a remedy for this perverseness, but not in others ; only in himself ; least of all in simple increase of wealth and worldly "respectability." We hope we have now heard enough about the efficacy of wealth for poetry, and to make poets happy. Nay, have we not seen another instance of it in these very days ? Byron, a man of an endowment considerably less ethereal than that of Burns, is born in the rank not of a Scottish plowman, but of an English peer ; the highest worldly honors, the fairest worldly career, are his by inheritance ; the richest harvest of fame he soon reaps in another province by his own hand. And what does all this avail him ? Is he happy ? is he good ? is he true ? Alas ! he has a poet's soul, and strives toward the infinite and the eternal, and soon feels that all this is but mounting to the housetop to reach the stars ! Like Burns, he is only a proud man ; might, like him, have "purchased a pocket copy of Milton to study the character of Satan ;"<sup>1</sup> for Satan also is Byron's grand exemplar,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the Letters of Burns, No. LIV., to William Nicol. In Letter LIII. Burns says also : " Give me a spirit like my favorite hero, Milton's Satan."

<sup>2</sup> Model, or copy to be imitated.

the hero of his poetry, and the model, apparently, of his conduct. As in Burns's case, too, the celestial element will not mingle with the clay of earth; both poet and man of the world he must not be; vulgar ambition will not live kindly with poetic adoration; he cannot serve God and Mammon.<sup>1</sup> Byron, like Burns, is not happy; nay, he is the most wretched of all men. His life is falsely arranged. The fire that is in him is not a strong, still, central fire, warming into beauty the products of a world, but it is the mad fire of a volcano; and now,—we look sadly into the ashes of a crater which ere long will fill itself with snow!

Byron and Burns were sent forth as missionaries to their generation, to teach it a higher doctrine, a purer truth; they had a message to deliver which left them no rest till it was accomplished; in dim throes of pain this divine behest lay smoldering within them, for they knew not what it meant, and felt it only in mysterious anticipation, and they had to die without articulately uttering it. They are in the camp of the unconverted, yet not as high messengers of rigorous though benignant Truth, but as soft, flattering singers, and in pleasant fellowship will they live there; they are first adulated,<sup>2</sup> then persecuted; they accomplish little for others; they find no peace for themselves, but only death and the peace of the grave. We confess it is not without a certain mournful awe that we view the fate of these noble souls, so richly gifted, yet ruined to so little purpose with all their gifts. It seems to us there is a stern moral taught in this piece of history,—twice told us in our own time! Surely to men of like genius, if there be any such, it carries with it a lesson of deep, impressive significance. Surely it would become such a man, furnished for the highest of all enterprises,—that of being the poet of his age,—to consider well what it is that he attempts and in what spirit he attempts it. For the words of Milton are true in all times and were never truer than in this: “He who would write heroic poems must make his

<sup>1</sup> The personification of riches, and hence of worldly glory (see Matt. vi. 24).

<sup>2</sup> Flattered.

whole life a heroic poem."<sup>1</sup> If he cannot first so make his life, then let him hasten from this arena; for neither its lofty glories nor its fearful perils are fit for him. Let him dwindle into a modish ballad monger; let him worship and besing the idols of the time, and the time will not fail to reward him,—if, indeed, he can endure to live in that capacity! Byron and Burns could not live as idol priests, but the fire of their own hearts consumed them; and better it was for them that they could not. For it is not in the favor of the great or of the small, but in a life of truth, and in the inexpugnable<sup>2</sup> citadel of his own soul, that a Byron's or a Burns's strength must lie. Let the great stand aloof from him or know how to reverence him. Beautiful is the union of wealth with favor and furtherance for literature, like the costliest flower jar inclosing the loveliest amaranth. Yet let not the relation be mistaken. A true poet is not one whom they can hire by money or flattery to be a minister of their pleasures, their writer of occasional verses, their purveyor of table wit; he cannot be their menial; he cannot even be their partisan. At the peril of both parties, let no such union be attempted! Will a courser of the sun<sup>3</sup> work softly in the harness of a dray horse? His hoofs are of fire, and his path is through the heavens, bringing light to all lands; will he lumber on mud highways, dragging ale for earthly appetites from door to door?

But we must stop short in these considerations, which would lead us to boundless lengths. We had something to say on the public moral character of Burns, but this also we must forbear. We are far from regarding him as guilty before the world, as guiltier than the average; nay, from doubting that he is less guilty than one of ten thousand. Tried at a tribunal far more rigid than

<sup>1</sup> The correct quotation is: "He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem." —*Apology for Smectymnuus*.

<sup>2</sup> Unconquerable.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek sun god, Helios, was said to pass each day across the heavens in a chariot drawn by four horses.

that where the *plebiscita*<sup>1</sup> of common civic reputations are pronounced, he has seemed to us even there less worthy of blame than of pity and wonder. But the world is habitually unjust in its judgments of such men; unjust on many grounds, of which this one may be stated as the substance: it decides, like a court of law, by dead statutes, and not positively, but negatively,—less on what is done right than on what is or is not done wrong. Not the few inches of deflection from the mathematical orbit, which are so easily measured, but the ratio of these to the whole diameter, constitutes the real aberration. This orbit may be a planet's, its diameter the breadth of the solar system; or it may be a city hippodrome,<sup>2</sup> nay, the circle of a gin horse,<sup>3</sup> its diameter a score of feet or paces. But the inches of deflection only are measured, and it is assumed that the diameter of the gin horse and that of the planet will yield the same ratio when compared with them. Here lies the root of many a blind, cruel condemnation of Burnses, Swifts,<sup>4</sup> Rousseaus,<sup>5</sup> which one never listens to with approval. Granted the ship comes into harbor with shrouds and tackle damaged; the pilot is blameworthy; he has not been all-wise and all-powerful; but to know how blameworthy tell us first whether his voyage has been round the globe, or only to Ramsgate<sup>6</sup> and the Isle of Dogs.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Plural of Latin *plebiscitum*, meaning an ordinance passed by the plebs, or common people, without the concurrence of the senate, or patrician body.

<sup>2</sup> A circus, or place for races.

<sup>3</sup> "Gin horse," i.e., a horse set to walk in a circle so as to move a cotton gin.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), an English satirist, remarkable for the trenchant and witty style of his prose works, of which *The Tale of a Tub*, and *Gulliver's Travels* are the best known. His character, though harsh, was less unlovely than it has often been represented, and was imbibed by the life-long apprehension of the insanity of his latest years.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), one of the most powerful prose writers of France. He was distinguished for his eloquent style, his ardor for liberty, and his unusual insight into natural beauty, but also for his lack of moral principle. His *Social Contract* and other works gave a powerful impulse to the French Revolution.              <sup>6</sup> A Kentish seaport and popular resort.

<sup>7</sup> The peninsula in the Thames opposite Greenwich, where the royal hounds were formerly kept.

With our readers in general, with men of right feeling anywhere, we are not required to plead for Burns. In pitying admiration he lies enshrined in all our hearts, in a far nobler mausoleum than that one of marble ; neither will his works, even as they are, pass away from the memory of men. While the Shakespeares and Miltons roll on like mighty rivers through the country of Thought, bearing fleets of traffickers and assiduous pearl fishers on their waves, this little Valclusa<sup>1</sup> fountain will also arrest our eye ; for this also is of Nature's own and most cunning workmanship ; bursts from the depths of the earth with a full, gushing current into the light of day ; and often will the traveler turn aside to drink of its clear waters and muse among its rocks and pines !

<sup>1</sup> The romantic valley near Avignon whither the Italian poet and scholar, Francesco Petrarca, retired, in 1338, for some years. The parallel suggested is between the lasting fame of Petrarch's sonnets to Laura, and that predicted for Burns's songs.

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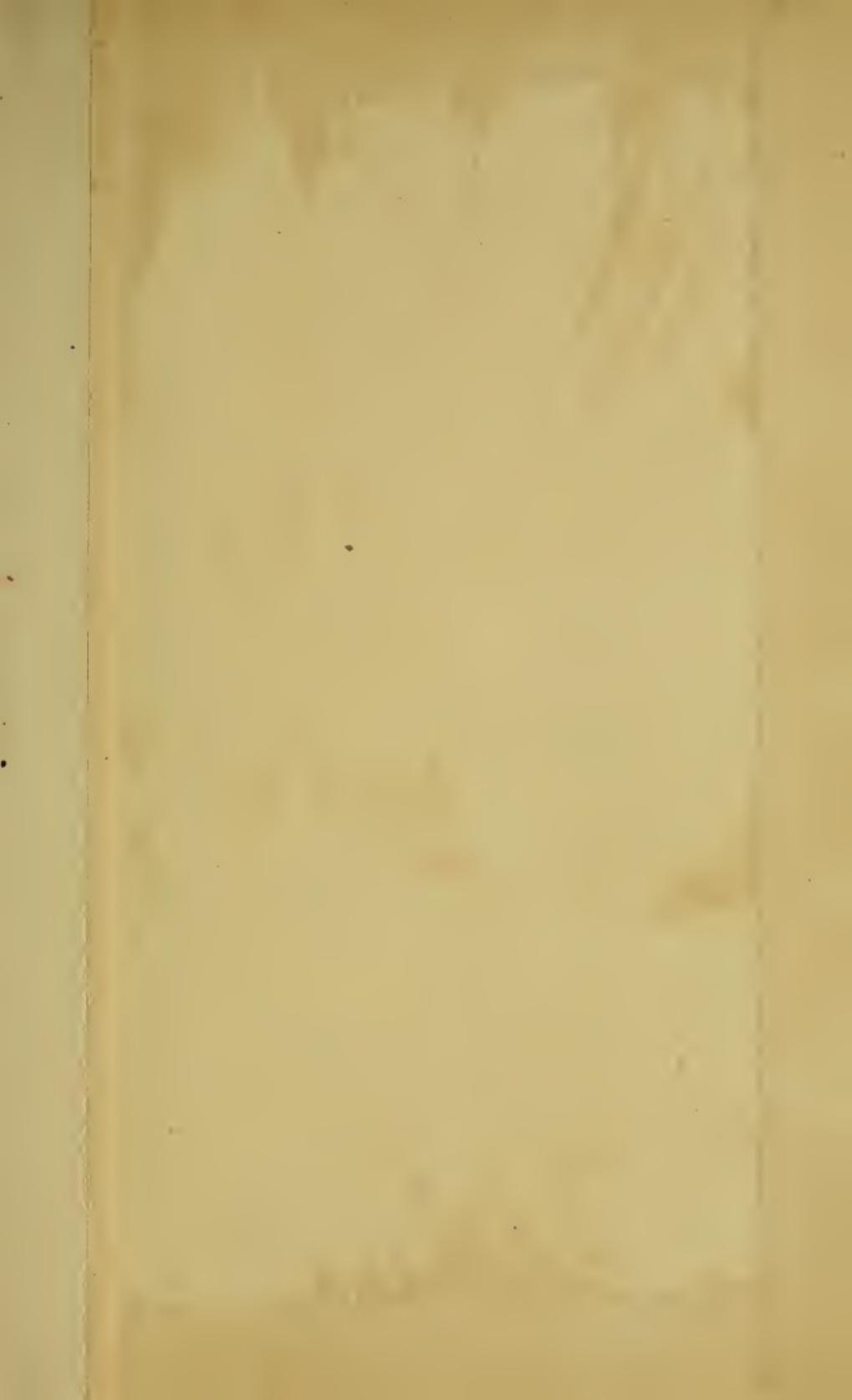
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